Stories

Ann Castellana Holly

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STORIES

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The Department of English

by

Ann Castellana Holley
B.A. California State University Northridge, 1988
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MANUSCRIPT THESES

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ABSTRACT

This is a short story collection about someone on the outside reaching in.
WHY WE DID IT

Hugh says we’re combining forces by getting married like Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand driving the Moors out of Spain, except that once his stepmother Louise finds out we are married, we will drive her further out of her mind. I’m not even sure I want to get married. We drive past the San Diego train station. The Spanish Mission style dome is shiny even in the drizzle. Sitting there right off the street, it’s clean looking, and like brand-new whitewash. It looks too new to be authentic.

We follow the road south toward Mexico. Our front windows are down because even though it’s winter, it isn’t that cold. Hugh doesn’t like to be too warm. As we cross the border, the white hen in the back seat clucks in her wire cage. Hugh eats oatmeal from a plastic Wile E. Coyote mug that he has had since he was small. He hands me a green apple to eat.

There is something about an apple that makes me less nervous. There is something so perfect about an apple. It’s so complete. It’s just there being an apple. Simple. Like I wish everything was.

It’s not that cold out, but I’m wearing my torn jeans with long underwear underneath and my big blue sweater. I like to feel cozy. Except for an old worn tee-shirt, it’s about all I’ve owned since my dad took off.

Hugh teased me in my bedroom about its bareness. No pictures on the wall. No clothes on the floor. He called me, “One Pair’ O Boots,” “One Towel.” “That is your Indian name,” he said, making strange circles in the air with his hands, “One Towel.”
I loved him, and I laughed. It still hurt a little. I always thought when you really loved someone the little things would stop hurting. I love him. Just maybe not in the right way. I don’t know.

He’s always wearing this necklace of beige seeds around his neck that goes down to his navel. The seeds look like tiny walnuts. A bit of the necklace is caught in the mug, so I lift it out and lick the oatmeal from the seeds. With my eyes a little closed, I know I’m half-smiling. I do it on purpose because I know it gets to him, and I want him to be happy with me. I need to know he’s here. “D’ya want some?” he asks.

I shake my head no. In the rear view mirror my expression reminds me of my mother. I look like her for an instant. I’m saying no the way she used to with my father when everything was easy between them. Back when they were on vacation from all their day-to-day problems, when it was easier. But I don’t feel easy.

Hugh, like my father, could slow down and be easy. I’m calm, but I’m only distracted. When I look out the window or hear a noise, I stop. Otherwise, I seem to always hear my thoughts thinking.

The car is old and the rubber around all the windows is crackling. It takes us a while to get the windows rolled back up. Hugh safety locks his dad’s car on Revolucion Boulevard. He leaves a crack in the back window for the hen, so she will still get some air. I make sure she has water.

Hugh’s a lazy-paced driver, but water still splashes out of the built-in tin sometimes when Hugh turns an unexpected corner. I like looking at the water, bits of seeds, and the occasional feather skimming on top of the water like an old fashioned
sailing ship. The feathers that have been in there for a while are sad looking and flat like what they are, soggy feathers.

Hugh puts his hand on my shoulder. I like the way the light dapples about the hen cage. The hen picks at the hard yellow corn that has fallen through the grating, as impossible for her to reach as it is for me to find my feelings about things sometimes.

Hugh sometimes speaks of repatriating himself to Mexico. His family once lived here. He was little then and absorbed things. Kids are like that. Like sponges. Hugh is fairly fluent, and I understand more Spanish than I can speak. We walk on the sidewalks of the larger aviendas and the narrow side streets, rummaging through the cachibaches in the tourist traps. Hugh walks ahead of me, lost in his shopping. He wants to get caught. He wants to buy the silver band rings. He wants to be married.

I feel lazy today. I only speak the essential Spanish. "Mota?" I whisper. "Mota?" I ask the street boys. An American boy catches my eye. Maybe the Mexican boys don’t want to do business with me, but he does. He wears a Shorty’s brand tee-shirt and oversized jeans that are sporting the words, "No Guarantee.” His name is Earl.

“I’m Earl,” he says when he shows me the joints in his pocket. Then he tries to hit on me. He says his dad is a dentist doing some missionary work down here. He says he has nitrous oxide in his car trunk. “I don’t do that hippie crack,” I say as I lean against his dad’s sleek car.

I pushed Hugh’s sunglasses back up where they slipped down my face when I looked at Earl’s pocket. He laughs and tries to smoke me out for free, but I say that I really have to bug and meet a friend. So finally he lets me go, but not before running
his fingertips against my leg as he passes me the joints. For ten bucks, I buy two
overpriced fatties of Mexican red hair from an American.

He’s an asshole skateboarder, but maybe it’s my fault. I’m too friendly. I stand
too close to people. I have since my mother died. Like if I’m close enough to grab a
shirt-sleeve or something nothing bad can ever happen. After she died there was no one
to touch my hair anymore. So I started touching people lightly on the arm like she did
when she was making a point. But I wasn’t making any point.

She said she didn’t like it, the way Americans didn’t seem to touch each other
much in public. She thought this was a strange country, though she liked the idea of
being in an American movie someday. My mother dreamed over Audrey Hepburn
movies the most. And some people said she looked like her with her sunglasses on.
They were about the same size.

I started leaning and half-closing my eyes. I was imitating her imitate Audrey.
Maybe I was internalizing everything. Maybe I was memorizing even what I found
most embarrassing about her, so I could stay close to her, maybe even be her. She’s
already been gone a long time. Being like her makes it seem easier to be with Hugh
sometimes.

I didn’t flirt with Hugh at first though. He was too important. I was just really
so quiet with him. And I think that is what made him notice me because I’m not that
pretty. Quite plain actually. Hugh’s ears are seashells. His eyes dance sometimes.

I’ve lost sight of Hugh now. He rushes forward in confusion and then relaxes
when he sees me. He nods his head fast. He’s found a stand selling jewelry, and he
waves me over. It takes me a while to get to him. I stop and buy the little individual
packets of Chiclets from the little kids in the street. Some of them look like they aren’t even six years old yet.

There are all kinds of shiny chains, silver bands, dull metal pins, and silver balls. Stars and eagles are stuck in the thin dark felt. They look like they belong on military uniforms. Rings interest Hugh. He checks them on our left ring fingers for fit. He tries to wiggle a little one on my finger. I say it is too tight. The Mexican teenager laughs and points to his toes. The next size is too loose. Not finding the ring just makes Hugh more determined.

My hands are small. They’re plain hands. Hands that look worked with, though I’m only sixteen. He said once that that was one of the things he noticed about me first. He said that he liked my hands. It looks like only one of the toe rings might fit. I say it might be a bad sign, and maybe we should skip it. We don’t really need the rings. We will know we are married. Who else matters?

Hugh just purses his lips together, slipping another toe ring on my finger. He says a ring is a ring. It fits, so he buys that one for me. He puts his handkerchief through the center of my ring and ties it in a knot. He sets the ring in his pocket and pats it. It will be safe there next to his dad’s lemon drops and his Red Skol. He wears his.

Now he needs to find clearer directions to where we are going. He asks some questions in the street and some boys point down an alley. We turn the corner and weave through the side streets that are probably dangerous. I’m grateful that Hugh is tall and strong looking. He goes to a small apartment and knocks on the door. A middle-aged woman answers the door.
He says our names in Spanish. He says what he wants. Her son speaks in broken English, trying to sell Hugh some illegal fireworks he has brought from somewhere inside the dank smelling room. Jars of roots and herbs border the sides of the walls. He talks. I don’t get most of it. I am looking at the bareness of the room behind the boy’s head. If I had extra money, I would buy some fireworks. After a few minutes, Hugh puts a coin in the woman’s hand and then nods at me. He stops talking though the boy doesn’t, and we walk away with me under his arm.

He looks at me as we head back toward the car. His pace changes to a military clip. I know he’s found our wedding chapel. We go back to the old Ford. Hugh fiddles with the map. An old looking mutt, skinny and with ringworm, scratches in the dirt by the car. I say I want to drive awhile. Clouds have gathered. Drizzle makes the streets look gray. Hugh asks me to wait until we are out of town. It may clear a bit soon. Right now it’s hazy.

He puts his hand down my sweater and touches one breast, leaving it there for comfort. The shacks are tumbled together in the Tijuana Hills, and the smell is of wet dust and sorrow and *papusas* frying. A small boy sits on a tar paper roof looking out at the nothingness, and I am happy not to be him. Hugh looks at me looking at the boy, and we barely avoid a taxi driver as he speeds down a steep gray hill at us.

“*Batos locos,*” Hugh whispers softly to me as the light catches the gold on one of his earrings. I used to tease him about wearing two like a woman. He said one made him feel like a pirate, or a homosexual, like his stepmother accused him of being for putting his arm around his dad all the time. That is something we both have, this need to be close. I like them now. I like his hippie gypsy style. Still I don’t feel like getting
married at just turned sixteen. But it's all he wants from me, and it's the only thing I can give him that will make things a little better right now.

Our chapel is in one of those nameless coastal towns. Hugh shows me. He points to somewhere between El Morro Santa Martha and Puerto Nuevo Cantamar on his dad's old map. I like the name of the sea nearby. It sounds pretty. Bahina Descanso. I say we must go there. He nods his head as I take off my boots and curl my legs under myself.

Resting my head in Hugh's lap, trying to recover from our drunk the night before, I can hear the hum of the old engine. I feel heat rise from Hugh’s lap. I play with the buttons of his overalls until they open on one side and cup my hand around his hip before I sleep. I wake in the desert and the sun is out. It's hot like I expected it to be. The hen is still picking lazily at the bottom of her cage.

Hugh pulls the car over to the side of the road. He drinks some bottled water we brought, pouring some into my mouth. I tell Hugh it's hot here, and Hugh pulls off my jeans and my long underwear underneath while I lift my sweater over my head and throw it in the back seat. His arms have leaf band tattoos around them. One arm has Celtic crosses interlaced that he paid for by saving all summer; he often wears no shirt if it's warm. He trickles the sun-warmed water on me. "Let's get sticky," he says.

Hugh and I look at each another. He touches me awhile before he takes his overalls off. He calls them cotton trousers. He's proud of the price he paid at the flea market in Ireland for them one Sunday afternoon when he visited some relations with his father last year. He brings me to him and I feel the itchy diamond pattern of the upholstery beneath me. The sweat rolls off my back and I stick to it.
I feel Hugh’s weight. The two sets of gold earrings he wears catch the light, and I feel Hugh against my thighs. His armpits smell like maize. I hold him, but I don’t really want him like that. He is nineteen and he thinks it’s just a matter of patience, that one day we will be like this and I will want him. But there is something wrong with me. That is all I can think as his tongue fills my mouth. There is something terribly wrong with me.

Whenever he tries to start, I freeze up. We make out for a while and then we wash outside the car with a towel and water. I put on Hugh’s white tee-shirt. He washed it in water for me. I pull on the cutoffs he had left in the back seat, synching them up with a bandana. They are baggy. Hugh’s shirt is already drying on me. The earth looks dry and white. Hugh pulls on his overalls, checks the engine, and puts some water in.

I fix some bread and jam we brought with us. I spread orange marmalade on Hugh’s lips and kiss it off. He says he’s sure we are ready to get married. I shake my head back and forth and look at him. His chest fills up with air and he brushes my hair from my eyes. He kisses the top of my head. He says to trust him, and I do mostly.

We stop at a store a few miles from the chapel. There is an old Coca-Cola sign painted on it. White paint peeling off the stucco surface makes the half-faded sign seem to shimmer in the sunlight. I feel really helpless all of a sudden. I want my mother here on this day. And then I think of her, and I shut my eyes really tight. My heart beats too fast, and I think if I only open my eyes quickly enough, she will be standing there waiting to tell me if I’m doing the right thing. When I open my eyes, all that’s there are
the white painted letters peeling and the Scarlet Runner beans growing on the fence beneath it, its small flowers so red and in bloom.

Hugh picks some fresh jalapeños and a six-pack of Coronas from a tattered cardboard and wire shelf. He cups a long red pepper in his hands as he rolls it between his palms to warm it. He says it’s to get the juices flowing. I remind him of what his father once told him. The pepper is supposed to get hotter if you curse at it in Spanish.

Hugh calls it pendejo and then eats it. His pale skin turns as red as the pepper but he still waits a minute, holding it in his mouth as the tears flow. He has a macho look on his face like this is supposed to get me, but that is finished for now. I think it won’t hurt him and I start laughing. He waits until I wander off to look at the ribbon piñatas. Then he pops open a beer and drinks it right there in the store. He comes to me and presses his cheek next to mine. “I’d die fer ‘ya,” he says.

Below the piñatas, I find some handmade sandals. I pick out a pair and put them on. The leather is stiff but they fit. They will have to be broken in. Hugh tucks my cowboy boots under his arm. I lift up one of the small brown sugar cones by the register, which is really a young woman pulling centavos out of her pocket. I nod my head yes nervously and step a little away, asking if the woman marrying us wants this kind of sugar.

He says no, that almost everything we need is in the car. I can have it as a souvenir if I like. His hand presses a little too hard on my shoulder like when he’s not getting what he wants. He is big, but not heavy looking, and blonde like my father. My eyes feel hard when he leans in to kiss me. He backs off and lets me go.
I can’t give him everything he needs. I don’t think anyone could. Sometimes when I am angry Hugh calls me his *hueros*, pale yellow peppers, very innocent looking, but just as deadly as the green ones. I feel more like ice than heat today, and I can’t get my feet warm even when I put them under Hugh’s bottom while he is driving. I grab a couple of warm bottles of cola and some coconut candies Hugh says we will need.

The sullen Indian looking girl standing behind the counter is freckled with brown spots on brown. Gold shines on her front left tooth. She looks up at the old woman that is staring at me in dislike. I feel very *tourista*, like what my mother called foreigners in Italy when that was one of our temporary homes, *Americanos*.

The girl counts out the change, and the woman watches for correctness. I can tell they are mother and daughter because of the same eyes and hair, and the familiar way they have. I want to touch Hugh, but he is a little away. The older woman hands me a rusty bottle opener, but my hands are shaking. Hugh has to come and open my cola and hold it for me. Hugh probably thinks I am having wedding jitters, even though we said we would wait until I was ready. Even if it weren’t tonight, it would be okay.

The mother slaps the daughter’s hand to remind her of our change. I think of nuns, knuckles and rulers. Hugh picks up the *pesos* and gently leads me out. Mestizos, Hugh says, have there own ways. He shrugs as we head to the car. We eat a little of the coconut candy. It’s pale and gelatinous and sticky. We drink the beers, some on the way, some outside the church.

It’s not a real church like a Catholic church. We are warm with liquor as Hugh opens his door. We are there. He walks around the back of the Ford to my side and opens the door for me. “I can’t,” I say. “Ya’ can,” he says as he puts his arm around
me. It’s a small fence first, with a white cross that has a wreath of homemade paper roses in faded pink and red around it. There is a tall overgrown garden behind it, wafting peppermint and bergamot smells into the breeze.

An arch covered with soft yellow climbing roses sits amongst the long untamed grass beyond the second gate. Musky rich hues surround us that are so different from the dirt road. There is a latch with a cross made of old rusty nails on it, the kind Hugh tells me the curendaras put chili peppers and salt on top of it to ward off pinche witches.

A large old yellow dog comes slowly from the house to greet us. Her tail wags as she stands among the weeds. Hugh says, “Hello, old Meme,” and pets her. I stand there lost in the smells until Hugh wakes me up with a wet kiss on my cheek. He licks my entire neck, and I swat him like a big mosquito. Everything’s lush and quiet as Hugh shuts the gate behind us. His old godmother, Manuela, opens the door to her cottage and waves. She is maybe seventy.

Hugh’s dad went here to be healed once long before Hugh was born. He was young and wandering and hoping for a cure for melancholy thoughts. For a while he stayed here, at seventeen, making love to Manuela who was forty. That was before he met Hugh’s mother, who had Hugh and then wandered off.

Manuela was a different sort of woman altogether. She was rooted to her house and garden and was reclusive. Hugh said there was just something special about her. Her feet were bare and small and exquisite, and she seemed to have the brute strength and courageous determination it takes to be happy. Hugh said, as she walked silently into the house, that perhaps she’s had many lovers like the goddess Yemaya, the Yorba
goddess of sea-waters, an Orisha, or ancestral saint out of Africa. I don't really know what that means. We agree that she is beautiful.

We drink the Mexican chocolate she made for us. It feels as if she knew we were coming. The table was set as we entered for three even though Hugh hadn't spoken to her in years. Hugh wants to get married here, in Santeria style, to honor his father who had once been this woman's spiritual ahijado. Hugh worshiped the saints he had learned from Manuela still. He had gathered her herbs of healing from this garden when he was a child.

While she is preparing the ground we will vow on, I ask Hugh if she will cook the white hen we brought for her to feed the saints. He clicks his tongue on the roof of his mouth to chide me, saying that's for our wedding guests. I'm uneasy because Hugh told me the hen has to die, and it will be pretty gross. I don't think I am up for it. But I don't tell him that. Sometimes there are things that are just too hard to talk about when you are kind of in love. I usually go along with Hugh. He knows what he wants.

He strokes Meme's ears and says we will get through it together. Manuela shoos the three of us out of the house and into the tall grass and flowers and the light blue sky. Hugh rakes some leaves with a rusted rake he finds behind the kitchen door. Some of the leaves are brittle and old. Some of them are new and green. I pick them up and put them in a space to start a compost heap. It's like we are homemaking, and it feels nice. I think that I could get used to it.

Hugh strips naked, and bows his body down to the ground to honor his spiritual ahijado as she helps me take off my clothes. She powders my body with cinnamon as she speaks her prayer in the old African language of the Yorbas. She anoints my head
with greenish, sage-smelling, and sticky oil. I drink the potion of coconut juice and rose
hips she holds to my lips from a round bowl and think of my mother’s lips kissing me
good night to calm down.

This is weird. I want out for a moment as I look at Hugh looking prideful, and
so much like my father. I think of running but there is nowhere to go. This marriage
isn’t legal in America anyway since we had no blood test. It’s real to Hugh though,
more permanent to him than if we got married in a holy mass. Still, I think Hugh
doesn’t really love me, or I would stop having doubts. But when I look at him, his eyes
dance, and he looks so happy. He must love me.

She has me repeat my promises slowly, word by word, to follow the path of
Yemaya, and to follow her path of love. She puts a beaded necklace like the one she
wears around my neck, with seven white and seven blue seeds. I feel her womanly
closeness. Our hips touch slightly, and I begin to believe my promises to Hugh. She
tells me I now honor the mother of fishes and fertility and the earth that is Hugh.

Manuela binds our wrists together with sticky vines. She burns incense;
patchouli and cinnamon scent the air. We are supposed to be concentrating on the
statue of Mary as she says the Aves, but I am concentrating on the cool breeze across
my breasts, the sticky weeds making my legs itch, and Hugh’s chest, devastating and
terribly beautiful. I’m feeling fuzziness in my head. She calls me la purisima but I’m
not completely. I just haven’t been able to comprehend letting a man inside of me. It
seems so odd and selfish of them to want that. I don’t know why.

She points to my eyes and then points to the Virgin’s statue. She takes stones
from a porcelain vase Hugh is holding, and waters them with a mixture of water and
honey, then places them on the white plates resting on the table that have our names written on them. Mary’s statue sits on the table next to a goblet of rum and a green poinsettia.

She moves a piece of wing bone in the air, and she makes the sign of the cross over us. She takes our coconut candies and arranges them around a bowl with herbs in it. She crushes them by hand, and she smells like lemon verbena as we pray three credos, and as the familiar words tumble out, I want to honor Hugh.

The old Catholic girl rises inside of me from Sundays where my favorite words were, “The mass is over. Go in peace,” and I look up at him with this love I thought it was impossible to feel. He looks back, and his eyes are watery. It’s the same way my mother’s eyes were sometimes when she looked at me, and I feel I love him.

Manuela looks very serious as she picks up the hen. I should close my eyes, but I can’t. She slits the white bird up the middle lengthwise with her sacrificial knife. It’s quick, but the hen jerks about splattering blood on the stones, the bowl, the poinsettia, the roses and us. I think maybe I am going to throw up. I shake, and as Hugh adds water to the bloodstained bowl, the last drops of blood fall over my head and naked body, feeling warm and sticky.

Manuela chants. It has a plaintive melody. I try to listen and close my eyes. I open them when she stops, and Hugh is still swaying slightly back and forth and humming and saying some words from childhood. She gives us the mixture in the bowl to drink. It’s bitter, fragrant and bloody. A strange smell. I think they have to be joking, but everything feels serious. My hands are shaky, so she puts the bowl to my lips and I drink instead of bolting. I feel hungry to be fed by a woman. Hugh drinks,
and then she throws pieces of coconut at our feet and laughs. They all land on their white sides, and Hugh says that means good luck.

Manuela smiles at me and pours a bucket of sun-warmed water over our heads. Hugh wraps me in a simple white shift she hands to him. He pulls on some white cotton drawstring pants, and I guess we are married now. Manuela pours honey water over the stones and the roses, cleaning the table. Meme presses against Hugh’s leg, licking some remnants of chicken blood on his toes.

We eat mole with dried cactus, beans and tortillas. Manuela shoos Meme out, impatiently waving a tortilla still in her hands. She wanders off to her small bedroom, coming out with two roots she places in the two flannel pouches she has sewn with needles. She says the needle carries the thread to us, as she puts one root bag on a string, and ties it around Hugh’s neck. She hands me the other.

She helped me dress our bed with green sheets. She put little seashells in all the corners and candles on the floor all around the bed. There is heaviness to the way she is moving as she lights the candles that I haven’t noticed before, and she turns to me with a look I don’t understand.

She leads me out to the garden and shows me some open peonies with bumblebees buzzing in and about them. She says men are like that, and I am the flower. That if I remember this, Hugh will be with me until he dies. She rubs some herbs, near the peonies, on my wrists and ankles, and we watch the sun turn to red, leaving a trail of pinkish clouds in its wake.

Hugh is waiting in the bed when I get back. He has the sheets politely above his waist. Part of my mind wants to run and part of it wants to stay. I can feel heat from
the pressure points on my wrists where Manuela has rubbed oil in. I pull off my white shift and try to cover all of Hugh, but I still don’t feel like it.

In the morning we say goodbye. I give Manuela the brown sugar cone I bought back at the store. We weave down a small dirt road to a stretch of beach Hugh knows about. On the way I have to pee, and I go off to the side of the road behind the car. I pull down my pants and accidentally sit on a little cactus. The whole way down to the coast Hugh is tapping his brakes, stopping, and picking out the little prickles. He’s apologizing for the cactus, as if it is his fault, and so part of me believes it is.

I sip a little tequila we brought from Manuela’s. It’s made from cactus with the *argula* worm in the bottom. They say that if you eat the worm at the bottom of the bottle you hallucinate. Hugh looks just plain happy looking at my bum.

At the beach, I try to teach Hugh to body surf, and he falls over a few times into the waves. Then he gets kind of serious about it. He tries to fight the waves, which is just the wrong thing to do. I don’t say anything. The ocean is a woman, and it’s easier to bend with her than to fight. The salt water stings where the needles were, but it also starts the healing.

We’re still on the beach as the sun goes down. Hugh starts to shake. At first I think he is cold, but then his face goes a deeper red than his sunburn. His body shakes in a helplessness I can’t help him with. He is having his own private earthquake.

I don’t know what to do, but I know I can’t just sit there. I wait until the sobs slow a bit, and then I imitate his Irish inflection. I tell him to keep his head up, and he’ll be grand. It helps a little. Hugh kind of laughs a little and then he snorts. I feel snot on my leg as he presses on his watering eyes. Then he just falls asleep.
Waiting for him to wake up, I hold him. His breathing is really deep as I inch my fingers and pull at my towel. I open the plastic baggy I keep tucked inside it, pulling out Earl’s Red Hair, and smoke a little. I’m trying not to think of my mother or Hugh or anything. When Hugh wakes up later, I light the rest of it and smoke him out as a wedding gift.

Hugh drinks a little tequila in the car, and he drives us further down the coast. His shoulders are full of tension, and he looks really sad. I tell Hugh about the barrata man in Brazil who keeps cockroaches in his big burlap bag. My mother told me he would sweep me up in it and carry me away if I wandered too far from home. Hugh says that maybe we should send his stepmother Louise to Brazil. We pull into an old whitewashed house with pale orange bougainvillea climbing up its front two stories and clinging to its roof.

Hugh flops down on the bed in his dad’s old sandals and falls asleep. As I watch him sleep, he looks so fragile that something passes over inside me from my mother to him, and I almost want him and want to wake him. In the morning he presses one hand between my legs, and they open a little. He looks at the ceiling and dusts my arm with his fingertips. I can’t always keep him from brooding.

“No iguanas,” I say. I thought there would be iguanas climbing in on the tree branches by the open window, pale and bright green, with bad attitudes. Hugh has lived farther down in Mexico, and I have lived so many places, and we remember iguanas somewhere but not from here. I wanted iguanas, and Hugh was sad there weren’t any.

A maid knocked on the door, and I pulled Hugh’s tee-shirt and his cutoffs on. I opened the door leaving the chain on. Hugh was already asleep again, his hand on his
stomach. My hair felt scratchy against my cheek. I just wanted her to go away. I heard quick insistent Spanish. Hugh opened his eyes and said, “She wants to clean up.”

“Solo towels,” I said to her. Hugh laughed at my flat Spanish as she fit two towels through the door. She kept talking, and Hugh said she wanted the old ones. They were clean too, but I shoved them through the door anyway. I had wanted to keep more than two. Hugh’s a big guy. The towels were skimpy and weathered.

“Come ta’ me, Mrs. Two Towels,” Hugh said, holding his arms open for me. Then he made a terrible face, and I thought of African tribesmen in the National Geographic magazine. I threw the two towels on his face.

I was missing the smell of coffee on his skin when Hugh finally woke up. It was still late morning, and so we decided to go back to San Diego, so Hugh could serve the coffee junkies. Girls flirted mercilessly with him at the Lemon Twist, a coffee bar his father had started, and I wondered if that would change now that we were married. I started getting nervous about losing him as I watched his backside disappear into the bathroom.

We took a shower together, and I thought about making love to him up against the pale yellow tile imprinted randomly with a pale sun or dandelion. We were soaping up, and I started to take off the silver band he’d bought to remind me we had done it.

“No leave it,” Hugh said. I looked at his mouth set firmly. “But soap will get underneath it,” I said. He told me that stuff like that shouldn’t matter now that we are married, and that my hands can smell like soap. I told him that was an odd thing to say. “Just don’t ever take it off,” he said. I said, “Okay.”
Hugh turns the car over and we wait for it to warm up. We always wait five minutes to be safe. "Car's old," he says. He says this every time. I'm enjoying the comfort of the repetition of his words. We have been loves for a while and man and wife in Mexico for at least a day. I lean my head out the window as Hugh cranks the Dead Kennedys and nods his a-rhythmical nod, listening, like a drummer to the downbeats in the songs on the tape. It's the same way he nods when he says my name. "Claire," he says, and bobs his head.

He takes his father's flask, with the same initials standing for Hugh Canton Hollister, out of his overalls and takes a sip of tequila. We finished part of the bottle the night before. He had insisted on pouring some into the flask for the trip back home. I spilled some on the ground for Hugh's ancestors to drink, and then we drank some for luck. Then we both grabbed the bottle together and broke it against the far wall of the hacienda, for my father who wasn't there to give me away, and for Hugh's stepmother who we would soon abandon.

Hugh hands me the flask and I taste the familiar harshness. "We forgot to eat the worm last night," I said. Hugh laughed. It's the first laughter since Hugh thought this thing up that sounds really easy to me. He touches my hand and plays with the silver ring there. He smiles. Hugh says, "Fasten your seat belt, darlin'," and I do because he is right.
I met Hugh’s dad before our first real date on Halloween. I was fifteen. I was almost sixteen. It was after five, and time for the little kids to come out early to get their candy, before the egg bombers took over the streets. “Hi, wait a minute,” he had said. We were on the living room couch. Its green and faded yellow stripes contrasted with Hugh’s checkered shirt. Hugh’s hand was high up on my thigh and I didn’t resist it. He didn’t move it when his dad came in. Mr. Hollister, Hugh’s dad, came back out of the bedroom he had gone into, opening the door with a flourish.

He was standing there with his tee-shirt off, his beer belly floating over his shorts like a proud trophy of his excesses. He had a beer in one hand and was dressed in pink tights and a tu tu. He did one pirouette, whirling about on one foot. Then he halfway sat and half fell down on the couch next to me. He took a sip of the open brew in his hand and said nothing. I laughed. Hugh smiled but was quiet.

Hugh told him he was pure piss and no vinegar as he squeezed my thigh. We sat there for awhile and watched TV. His dad flipped around the channels and we made fun of the tight smiles and boufy hairdos of the singers on the Lawrence Welk Show. Hugh’s dad moved his beer to the rhythm of Lawrence’s conducting stick and smiled.

He was pretty drunk. The news was warning us not to let kids eat apples or tampered-with looking candy. An expert housewife was showing women what to look for on the special segment, rustling tinfoil. He switched to an old black and white Disney cartoon on another channel. A skeleton played his bones with mallets like he was a xylophone. Spooky creatures danced about. We watched for a while longer.
When we got up to leave, Hugh kissed his dad’s forehead. “Really, dear,” his stepmother had said from the open kitchen door where she was sitting with a bottle of Wild Turkey. She was smoking menthols. I told Hugh that only junkies smoked those things. I didn’t care if she heard. She didn’t even say hello to me. Hugh bristled though, and I suddenly felt like I was taking advantage of his good nature. I tried to apologize for being rude to her when we got outside, but Hugh just said shush. He said that she deserved it.

It was hard to read Hugh. Some things I did I thought should bother him a bunch, but he never said anything. Other times I’d say something I never thought would have upset Hugh, and he looked like I shot his dog or something. That seems like one of the hard things to read about guys: when they will get upset. I guess they have the same emotions we do. But usually all you get is a big reaction at the end. You don’t get all the little clues and signs that you’re messing up. So it’s hard to know what you can get away with and what you can’t.

We walked out in the hills above and beyond the squat and simple house and through the long grass that grew tall due to the extra water in the aqueduct. It was sticky, and the smell made my nose itch inside. There were a few bugs buzzing around. A dragonfly flew past my head. I felt really happy.

Hugh smelled of coffee that first date night, from the Lemon Twist, where he ground coffee and waited on housewives, students and businessmen. The younger set usually sat in the few booths by the windows, studying, reading, or trying to impress each other. Sitting around like artists or pretend artists. They were cliquish, and I was new to the scene, so I kept to myself.
Hugh was good at tactfully refusing the dates girls and sometimes women asked him on. But he turned a violent red when anyone said anything that could be construed as sexual. He was trying to untangle from Teddy. She was my new hippie foster parents' daughter. Her crush on him was massive, and I was kind of embarrassed for her. She fell all over herself, trying to impress him, with her great concerns for the environment, and hopes for world peace.

She didn’t talk to me much. She was mad at me for not taking her invitation to drop acid with her and her boyfriend and watch Alice in Wonderland on the TV. It was her first time tripping and she took the hit she bought for me along with hers when I shook my head no. I don’t know for sure, but she seemed even freakier to me after that. She told me her boyfriend was taking her to clubs and giving her X and coke and who knows what else.

I walked around her at the house, avoiding her and her boyfriend. He cleaned carpets and had dropped out of high school. He was staying rent-free. That’s why they picked up another body from the foster care, so they could have the extra cash to feed him. He was always eating, even though he was skinny and kind of rabbity looking. He was staying out back in the guesthouse with her until his mom’s house was remodeled. He said he couldn’t stand the construction noises.

The second day I lived there I put some apples into the refrigerator I’d stolen off a tree whose branches fell over onto the public sidewalk. I figured the apples on that side were public property, and I was the public. They ate them all while I was in the shower. I opened the fridge and looked at the empty space where my apples were
supposed to be, and then I looked at the two of them. Teddy said I had to write my name on my food or anyone could eat it. I didn’t say anything. I just walked away.

I had a headache, and I had walked a long way in the heat to get home from the coffee shop. Everything sucked, and I didn’t have the patience to talk to a couple of beanbrains who scarfed my lunch while my back was turned. Who in this world writes her name on an apple?

Hugh refilled my coffee cup for free, and Teddy noticed I was there. She actually sneered at me before engaging Hugh again. She usually had a shocked expression on her face. I thought about how she walked around in her bra and cutoffs in the back yard, looking like she was about to be split in half by a lightening bolt most of the time. She was insecure about her looks. She kept dying her hair different colors like it would make a difference. She’d come into my room, all nervous and chewing her nails, with a bottle of henna and a wild look in her eyes. She couldn’t even ask me for help.

Even though she was older than I was, she acted like a little kid. She came in my room a couple of times, until the only way I could get some peace was to go help her. She sat down outside on a wooden crate near the chicken coop and listlessly handed me the bottle of hair dye. I had painted her hair without talking, and it still seemed like she hated me with this sibling rivalry-type thing when I’d only been there a few days.

Hugh and I had eased into the beginnings of a friendship based on free coffees and what I was pretending to read while I watched him. Sometimes I read though. I didn’t like my new high school, so I stopped going. Even little questions like where I
was from set me off. Hugh didn’t seem to think it was strange that I was there all the
time. He didn’t care how long I hung around or ask me what I was doing.

He saw me fumbling in my pocket for change and counting, and he set the first
free cup of coffee down on the counter. I winced. I felt like a loser who couldn’t even
afford a cup of coffee, and maybe I was. Hugh looked at me and said his grandmother
used to always say that there were two kinds of Irish, Pig Shit and Lace Curtain. He
was Pig Shit Irish. I smiled, but I really didn’t believe he knew what it was like to not
have anything but the clothes on your back, or to not really mean anything to anybody.

At high school, during lunch, Teddy would look at the guys from the swim team
popping tater tots in the air from their mouths. The tater tot would float through the air,
and the next swimmer would catch it in his mouth, like they were playing some kind of
oral Hacky-Sack game. Then she’d look up at the sky and she would see a bird or
something. If the bird was white, it was some kind of sign to talk to some guy.

Her girlfriends would nod like those Tijuana velvet dogs people used to put in
the back of their cars. You know, the kind with wire in their necks that bob when you
turn a corner. They’d nod like she was really saying something. What can you say to
people who think every little thing that happens to them is a sign from the universe?
Except, of course, the real things that happen to them. She was just a girl, right? Not
some connecting rod for unexplained phenomenon.

Before finding this place, I was lonely in a way I couldn’t stand. I spent time
lifting these little useless things from the dollar store down the road. Maybe I was
trying to make myself feel better for all the things I didn’t get before. I didn’t even
keep them. I put them in dumpsters on my way home or threw them down the rain
gutters.

It was getting away with it that counted. It proved that I was invisible, and
nothing I felt could really hurt or matter because I wasn’t really there anyway. As soon
as I saw Hugh, I didn’t feel like stealing anymore. I wasn’t looking for a lover. It was
his movements I loved, that I was falling in love with. He moved with carefulness, the
carefulness of the easily hurt.

I wished somebody would give me back all my summers, so that I could spend
them with him, lying in bed, sun pouring in the windows. Sticky afternoons. I thought
about it all the time, but I really just wanted to enjoy the idea of it as I sat there. I
wasn’t ready or anything. I didn’t even talk to him until he tried to talk to me.

Teddy was there in the only dress I owned besides what I was wearing. She was
used to just getting anything she wanted. Hugh arched his back, making himself bigger,
his hands stretched out on the counter. She just wouldn’t shut up. I didn’t know it was
Hugh she really wanted. She asked if he liked her new dress, and his eyes went to
frustrated slivers. “It’s mine,” I said softly, but loud enough so they heard.

Teddy blankly looked at me. She looked at Hugh. She said “I was, like, some
hopeless foster case or something, staying at her house.” Hugh’s eyes opened wide, and
then he turned and looked at me. His face looked tight, like when you notice the first
flaws in your future love’s character, and decide whether or not it’s stuff you can deal
with. I didn’t want him to know anything about me. I slouched over my coffee and
stared at the espresso machine like it was something new, feeling sick.
I hated that she had that much power over me. I'd had it with her psycho-cosmic, “Oh wow I’ve been here before, I just had to sit here and meditate on it, I feel so crystallized, so infinite,” Zuni bimbo; soul seeking; acid dropping; pennyroyal tea sipping; procrastinatory ass. I’d had it. I’ve just had it with her, I thought. But even now, when she was being so awful, I still wanted her to like me somehow. Underneath it all she did have a kind of fragility that made me protective of her even when she was lashing out at me. I felt confused and twisted.

I decided that I’d leave as soon as she left. I’d avoid the Lemon Twist for a month or so and then sit out of sight. Hugh brushed his hand over mine as he walked by with someone’s cappuccino and smiled at me. Teddy looked at me, and at Hugh, like she’d just lost everything that she ever wanted. It was the first time Hugh ever touched me, and I was too tense to really feel it. That got me really mad at her.

She tried to get Hugh’s attention a couple of more times, but he shut her out, even when he put down a second pennyroyal tea for her. She gave up and left without even touching it. Hugh just up and asked me if he could call me at Teddy’s house. He knew the number. I shook my head no. Talk to me here, I had said. Hugh said most girls weren’t worth worrying about, but that he thought I was neat.

Halloween was our first date night, but we knew each other enough to be comfortable. We sat there in the long grass, not talking or touching, until I put my hand on Hugh’s chest and he curled his arm around me. We stayed out there getting goose bumps and then we snuck in and ate leftover candy and egg salad sandwiches. Hugh told me then and there that he planned on marrying me.
I thought he was crazy. He didn’t know me. I opened a Tootsie Roll and ate it. I doubted my initial attraction to him. He must be a case or something. Then I remembered that old joke, about not wanting to be part of any club that would have me as a member. I think that’s from the Marx Brothers or W.C. Fields. I used to watch all those movies when I was a kid.

He said he was sincere about it, but I still wasn’t sure why he was teasing me. I decided he was insane again. He kissed me, and I said I had to go home. He asked to walk me home, but I felt like walking alone. He kissed me at the front door. He ran a hand up my skirt. I leaned into him despite myself. He ran a finger up one of my thighs, putting his finger around the underside of the elastic on my underwear. He twisted the elastic, pulling them down a little way on the left side as he leaned his right side next to me. “Ya’ sure ya’ canna’ stay?” he said.

I nodded my head, and he kissed me again. He held both my hips and kissed my neck. I almost caved. Then he let me go. He waved as I looked back, one shoulder against the doorframe, posing. I decided to try to hate him. It was easier than caring. I’d shut myself off from caring about people. People disappoint you.

I decided I’d stay away from the Lemon Twist for a month or so, then come in and sit in the back out of sight. I tried, but I just couldn’t take it. I passed by my room one afternoon, and Teddy was sitting on my bed looking through my old journal. I hadn’t written in it since before I moved in. She’d taken my underwear drawer, and she’d dumped it onto the bed. It looked like she had already separated out a bra she liked. I looked right at her, but she just looked at me and then went back to reading it. I
felt sick again, but I wasn’t going to let her get the best of me even if she told the whole school about what she had read there.

The day I got to her parent’s house my caseworker introduced me. Starla was watching Mystery in the den and Sky was ironing his shirt for work. Starla didn’t do anything outside the house. She didn’t do much in there either. Sky ironed his own shirts while Starla went off to her Thursday Margarita therapy with some girls she knew from way back in high school. She’d been trying to write the same mystery novel for ten years. I stood underneath a wheel of laundry that was hooked up onto a wood frame and could be pulled up to the top of the redwood ceiling with a rope. The house was like a big renovated barn in the middle of suburbia. It wasn’t like being really middle class.

Starla asked if I was a Virgo. My caseworker fumbled through my paperwork and gave my birthday. “That makes her a Scorpio,” Sky said. Starla said they were all Virgos there, and that Scorpios were usually self-destructive. I knew everything was going to be some kind of cosmic eruption for her. Everything would mean something, and she would distort it to serve her own purposes. She even made the point that she planned Teddy to be born under Virgo. I wanted to walk into the kitchen, go into the cabinet under the sink, pour myself a glass of bleach, and drink it.

“This is a nightmare” was all I said, as I walked out the front door. Sky grinned at me. I thought of how ridiculous everything was, and I went out to look in the street for half-smoked cigarettes. Somehow the commotion inside over my birth date had begun to subside. The caseworker tried to calm Starla’s fears. Sky spoke of the
necessity of saving money. Starla’s fears quelled enough, on a superficial level, to take me in on a trial basis.

Before my father left, he took me to Greece with him. He lay on the beach drinking Raki and crying hard. I was nine, and I really didn’t get it. He wouldn’t let me out of his arms for even half a second. I squirmed. I wanted to go swimming. He said I swam before I walked. He said it before he explained to me that he couldn’t take it anymore, and that he was going away for a little while. I would go stay at one of his Air Force buddies’ places for a while.

I did but it didn’t work out, and he forgot to come back until I was fourteen. He walked out of his car and stood in the street across from the front porch at the house that I lived in with my boyfriend before this. I was drinking iced-tea. He just showed up when no one else was home. He stood by his Mercedes. He stood there in his Armani suit with his shoulder length hair gone from blonde to white, and I looked at him. I couldn’t think what made him find me. What made him think he could not honor his natural obligations and then just show up like that?

I was in a bathing suit, so I ducked into the house and threw on my boyfriend Trippy’s old trench coat and a pair of sneakers. I wasn’t sure if he had come to get me or what. I stood outside and he got out of his car and looked at me from the side of the road for a while. Eventually, he just got in that car and pulled away. Postcards started coming once in a while. Messages like, “Wish you were here,” or, “Having fun in this or that city,” came to me, but I never saved any.

That was what Teddy was reading about in my journal, and I flipped out and went to the Lemon Twist. The place was closed in the middle of the day. It was closed,
with a handwritten note that said, "Closed for a While" and, "Come Back Later." I didn’t know what to do or where to go. I couldn’t go home yet. I walked to Hugh’s house and knocked on the door. I kept knocking. I rang the bell.

Hugh’s stepmother finally opened the door. Her breath was sour with old Wild Turkey. She looked scared and pale. She told me she didn’t want solicitors, and I told her I was there for Hugh. She said, “Oh,” and just left the door open, and disappeared into her bedroom. I wandered around in Hugh’s house, feeling like a thief. I saw Hugh sitting out back, watering the grass with a hose. I pushed on the screen door and called his name.

He didn’t react, so I shut the door behind me. I sat down next to him. “Where ya been?” he said. I couldn’t figure out anything to say, so I just stayed quiet. I looked up at Hugh, and his face was red and sad. “Where’s your dad at?” I asked. He started crying. We just sat there. Hugh led me into his bedroom after awhile. We made out a little under the banners he had for different baseball teams.

Two days after our date Hugh’s father had died of liver failure, instead of the cancer Hugh told me they had all been worrying about. When Hugh told me, it was awful. I felt more hurt than I should have maybe, like I was getting cheated out of having a father again. I should have felt his pain instead, but it didn’t feel real or possible yet. I felt guilty. I felt like a bad person and I felt angry at my father.

Hugh’s father, like mine, drank before he died. Mine hadn’t died, but he’d been absent, and I realized for the first time that I had no desire to find him. I couldn’t feel for my father what Hugh was feeling right now.
Hugh’s father just couldn’t stop the booze. That was his doctor’s pronouncement. Hugh’s stepmother had him cremated and hid the ashes from Hugh. There was going to be a service without his dad even being there. He told it all fast to get it out. His stepmother said she wanted her ashes scattered with his when she died.

I couldn’t say or do anything, so I just let him lie next to me and feel awful. I spent the night, and Hugh slept like the dead. In the morning Hugh’s stepmother let him know, through his locked door, that it was time to go to the funeral service. Hugh said he didn’t want to go. She said that this was his father. He told her she had forgotten that. We heard a door shut and then we heard her Japanese economy car start up, pinging like a loud sewing machine.

Hugh and I got up, and we searched the house for the ashes. We turned over cushions and looked in every cupboard but found nothing. I looked on her vanity drawer and found a slip made out to open a safety deposit box. Hugh saw me looking at it and came over. “My father’s in a safe,” he said. He looked at me like he was literally losing it. Hugh knocked his fist on the table, and some perfume fell over and smelled up the room. He was beyond angry. It smelled like Louise.

He said his father wanted his ashes scattered in Mexico by the sea. He wouldn’t like being in a bank vault. We looked all over the house again, but we never found them. The next day was going to be my birthday, and I really felt like being alone, but there was no place to go where no one was. I had my own ritual. I’d plant a six-pack of flowers. I’d make myself chamomile tea and light a candle for my mother. Even if I was ratty-tatty, I always found some money for flowers. Hugh didn’t want to face his stepmother. We talked about it. Hugh decided we would go to Mexico and chill out.
He'd gone to the bank and drained one of the joint accounts before Louise could get a hold of it.

He asked the teller, nicely, to let him stand in the vault alone for awhile. He talked to his dad. The Lemon Twist would come to him in the will. Louise would get the house. They had talked about it. He could move his stuff into one of the empty back rooms at the Twist. We could get away for a while and then sort it out. He asked me to live with him, and I said yes. I would have said yes to anything that wasn't Starla or Teddy. I thought of those occasional postcards that my father sent me. I decided I'd stick things out with Hugh for as long as he needed me. I would be better than my father. I wouldn't bail on Hugh.

I thought of two years before, when Trippy got Born Again and started flipping out over everything that I did, it got so that I couldn't stand it. It was his mother who told me. She was the one who said she just didn't think it was working out. Things had gotten tense. It wasn't any good having me living at their house anymore.

I wondered if Hugh would keep me. I thought about how Trippy and I used to hike in the Topanga Canyon Hills all the time. We would go up there with a picnic I made for us. We'd look for green sage on the high south-facing slopes, bringing it down in bundles to sell as incense to the local head shops. We were careful to take just enough so the plants would still keep growing. It took all morning to get up to the right elevation where it grew.

Trippy was just the perfect local surfer boy. Everybody called him Little Brother out there. One day, when he was teaching me to surf he took my wave, and I caught up short and crashed. I tried to dive down, but I didn't have time. Trippy wiped
out, and his foot hit my head. I thought I would pass out and drown. I was so mad at him I couldn’t talk to him for a few days. He found God, and I went back into foster care.

I didn’t want to catch another bad wave, but Hugh seemed more connected. He engaged me, and not just until the next wave. Looking back over my seventeenth birthday cake, Hugh called my times with all those indifferent people my isolation therapy period, that I’d learned how not to think I was lonely, which was, of course, rubbish. But I didn’t want to look at that. I didn’t know then if he would stick with me. I was happy and sad and scared and on my way to Mexico.
“Hand me that wrench will ya?” Trippy said, as his white dog barked and pushed her paws just under the driver’s side door. His tan hands came out and pulled a little on the dog’s paws. His hands were cut and callused. Big brown knuckles. The dog barked and ran in circles like it was an old ritual between them. I looked for the wrench but didn’t see one. I tried to move silently in my boots as I heard pebbles move.

Trippy’s voice is the first male voice I’ve heard in a while that makes me feel safe. I don’t want to like, it but I do. It’s warm. I’m up here because Saila hired me on kitchen staff out of desperation. I came up to camp with a bunch of other underprivileged kids. The other prep-cook just left. She left without even telling anyone. I was fourteen and fairly strong.

I made myself useful when she came out of the kitchen with a cart full of bread and some big tubs of jam. She shouted, “Everyone for themselves.” Overwhelmed, she asked if I could give her a hand. I was by the kitchen. I was lucky I guess. Everyone was finding ways of being the delinquents they were.

Other kids were raiding the counselor’s cabins and running a black market for candy. The stuff that we were supposed to receive never reached us. The counselors kept the generous sugar donations from the local churches hoarded in their cabins. Meanwhile I was cutting carrots and cracking eggs for two hundred people.

I liked the kitchen. It was big and metallic and organized. I could always know what to do in a kitchen. Saila said she would pay me temporary wages until they found a new girl. When everyone went home, I ditched the bus. No one noticed. I’d been
here a month and the system didn’t miss me. The people I’d been staying with called once to see if I was ok. Saila said I was happy. They still got their check as if I was there. They let it lie.

She had sent me to gather the dishes Trippy piled up in the maintenance shack. She said Trippy forgot things, that he’d done so much acid he was legally insane like a billion times over, but he was harmless. Rumors in the camp made him seem like a wild man with tangled hair who lived in a cave and picked his toes with the bones of small children. I thought it best to get the dishes and move on.

She told me to remind him that the porches on the guest cabins needed to be sealed again and varnished. Tell him they needed two coats. I followed the dog up here after Saila patted it. She said, “Lobo go find Trippy.” The dog was white and half wolf. I thought of an old Indian saying I read about in kids’ book at the public library. When you get to heaven, all the animals you have known are there to greet you. They talk about how you treated them and decide whether or not you should get into heaven.

The mountains looked a little dry in places. When I got to the shack I leaned on the rusty hood of the old blue Chevy parked in front and looked at the fuzzy outline of the clouds in the eggshell sky. Blue jays chattered in a tree nearby. I closed my eyes. When Trippy spoke I jumped back. I didn’t know he was there. He paused or something, or I would have known he was there. I was sensitive to noise, and always looking over my shoulder for trouble. He stayed under there fiddling with car things.

I moved to get the dishes, and felt peaceful as I stacked the turquoise plastic bowls by size. They were lightweight and easy to carry. I liked the way they were already rinsed out and dry. They weren’t sticky with syrup or bad smelling with old
food. In the shack the smell of sawdust and oil, mixed with pinesap and sage made me feel sleepy. I wanted to linger by the lit dried bundle of sage that was tied by a leather loop to the wall. Still, I thought it was kind of irresponsible for him to keep it lit and unattended in the summer. The dry California Mountains could go up fast. I guess he’d never been a Boy Scout. I heard Trippy laughing as Lobo barked. I looked out the door to make sure he was still under the Chevy before I headed back down the trail to the lodge.

Saila told me all about her and Trippy. She had known him since they were kids. She remembered he was snow boarding when she fell for him. He’d shot down the mountain, whooping and twisting his left foot, adjusting his stance and occasionally pushing off with his right, yelling and making motorcycle sounds and just mostly hanging on. When he twisted and ended up at Saila’s feet, he kissed her and said downhill worked better when he made noise. He stayed behind when his friends piled into his mother’s van. Since they quit each other, he’s been hermiting and reading Exodus.

I like it here. I get up to make the coffee every morning at six a.m. Then I go around and make sure all the mugs are washed and stacked, and make sure there are fake sugars, real sugars, and creamer. The only bad part is carrying the container if it’s full from the day before. It’s too heavy. I have to scoop coffee out of it with a cup and put it into a bucket. It takes a bunch of trips with two coffeepots to fill the thing.

If I’m too sleepy, I mess up. Sometimes I get woken up by splashed hot coffee. I have long brown oven-mitts, but they’re too thick to get my fingers around the coffee.
pot handles. I do it the slow way, coffeepot by coffeepot. I want to get some mittens when I get my first pay at the end of the month if it works out here, if I can stay.

When I boil water for the tea, I try only thinking about the tea. I decide to look at the little details. Take each moment in the moment. No future or past pain, no future hopes. Still, sometimes, without handles, last night’s coffee containers get away from me and I drop them. I’m good at jumping back to keep the liquid away from me. When I cut carrots, I try only to be cutting carrots. Keep my mind there.

I slap the dishes in the huge stainless sink, turn on the water, and wash. Saila says that I hold anger in my body. I look up, and she asks me how Trippy is. She goes on about Trippy in her chitchat style. It’s irritating. She says Trippy’s mother was from some place like Puerto Rico, in the back country, and that they lived with nothing but pigeons to eat sometimes. He could shoot a dove down with a tiny rock inside his slingshot, and make a stew that would make you cry. That he grew up early, living off the land, and was part animal when they first met.

Trippy and his mother moved to New Mexico when he was nine. Saila and Trippy went to the same Unitarian church there. She was older and he was a kid, but they bonded. She used to braid his hair. I looked up, exasperated, as I set the rinsed dishes to dry. I felt nervous. I wanted to ask her why she couldn’t stop talking about him if it was over. Wouldn’t she want to move on? But I kept my mouth shut.

I think gossip is something I didn’t learn because my mother died when I was young. I suppose it’s a way for girls to bond with each other, but I never liked it. I didn’t like learning things about people I didn’t know. I felt like I was looking in the
windows of somebody else’s house. Their lives looked more solid and real than mine was.

There’s a lot of things you can’t say when you don’t have a family to talk about. People find you suspicious or weird if you don’t join in. Or they ask you personal questions pretending they care, and then they spread it around or laugh at you with their friends. People like to feel they are better than you. That’s about what I’ve figured out so far.

I almost asked her to be quiet. Then she said one last thing and did get really quiet. She said to be careful wrapping my heart around Trippy. I suddenly realized how transparent I was. I felt guilty and confused. She told me I’d see Trippy tomorrow morning. That he’d come in to breakfast when the Unitarian kids came from all over to help fix the place up and paint the porches. I looked at the little lines around Saila’s brown eyes as she added that he was older than me. He was almost seventeen.

I came in late for breakfast. I’d done my work early and taken Lobo and the other dogs up into the hills before breakfast. Lobo picked the path. She led me up to Shroom Rock where all the hippie kids wrote their names and painted suns and swirls on the rocks. *Emma loves Earl*, one of them said. Lucky Earl. I sat for awhile. I was up past the creek, and it was almost dry in the summer, where the old log sat across it.

The crisp air cut in my lungs, so I walked slowly. I picked a bunch of the yellow straw flowers that dry so well for Saila. They grow along the creek bed, but I don’t know their name. I dug up some yellow Indian Paint Brush to replant near my cabin. Later Trippy told me not to. They don’t transplant. They were becoming rare. It grew anyway though. I’m better with plants than I am with people.
The lodge was still warm from the night before. The wood in the fireplace still glowed orange in places. Trippy was there too. He had loaded up his plate with bacon, and I saw him sticking it in his mouth. He was standing up as I walked in the door. He had the table manners of an animal, I thought. He was stuffing fried dead pig-fat into his mouth while he was chewing. He looked around, his mouth full, and sat next to a cute redheaded girl who came up for the Teenage Liberal Religious Youth conference.

Free condoms and co-ed cabins were standard for them. It was rumored that the Unitarian minister’s wife was loose and gave the best head. It was a new scene for me. People so loose and relaxed about everything. The minister’s wife was the only adult up here besides Saila. I thought they were a bunch of people who were a little bit crazy and appeared slightly too happy to be real. Cheerful, like those perfume girls who want to spray you with a new scent in a shopping mall, only without the malice.

I knew it was Trippy because he was very tall and his skin was umber. That is what Saila told me I would notice. He sat down next to the redhead and started chatting her up, just like Saila had predicted the day before. She said he always looked for girls at the conferences. His mouth was full, and I was glad I wasn’t sitting across from him.

Trippy stood up when he saw me in the doorway with a bunch of yellow flowers in my hand, darker yellow than my hair. I was flattered because I never thought I was very pretty. He dropped half a piece of bacon onto his plate and waved to me. I remembered I was wearing a kitchen apron. I had forgotten to take off the night before. I thought he was attracted to me, and I flattered myself that he was staring. He worked here too. He was just spacy.
I walked toward the kitchen to cut up more fruit salad for lunch and pour honeyed yogurt into bowls. Trippy said, “What am I doing?” He was talking to himself as I went through the kitchen door.

Saila had saved me a plate of pancakes. I wasn’t hungry. Trippy must have picked himself up and come into the kitchen because I heard him saying hi to Saila as I pulled a big jar of peaches from a shelf. He grabbed some coffeecake as I turned around. I took an orange from a big metal bowl. Saila rummaged in the freezer for something. She laughed as he shoved the coffeecake in his mouth. Her eyes turned to meet mine.

“Hey Boots,” he said, looking at my shoes. I realized he knew who I was. That he remembered my shoes. He told me the wrench he wanted wasn’t under the truck after all. It was in his hand. I didn’t say anything. He waited awhile and then said he needed some help loading varnish into the truck. He said Brice was coming up late, and he had to go get it today.

He asked Saila if he could borrow me to go to Redlands and help him load the stuff up. Saila said it was up to me. Trippy said he’d be back at noon to pick me up either way. I could think about it. “Claire meet Trippy,” she had said, but he was out the door already.

I hadn’t been down the mountain yet, and I wanted to spend some of my wages. I took an advance from Saila’s coffee tin. She was saving, going to Europe next year. She counted out thirty dollars for me. She trusted me, showing me where she kept her money. Nobody had trusted me for a while. It was a lot of money. She gave me thirty dollars. For thirty dollars I could get some socks, a pair of long underwear for the
winter, and maybe mittens to hold the coffee pots with. I wanted the kind of mittens with the fingertips already cut out. Maybe a jacket even, if I could find a thrift store.

I didn’t know about Trippy. The whole bacon thing turned me off, but I wanted to buy some warmer clothes. He drove the truck down and we didn’t have much to say. We stopped at the A&W in Redlands and then the hardware store. The guy in the hardware store was gross. I got kind of claustrophobic there.

There were these cheesecake nudes of women on the wall, holding power tools with brand names like Snap-On. Their bodies were bigger, but like mine. Trippy looked at them a little long. He did that. He fixated on me or a tree or his bacon. He spaced out and came back. He’d run three reds on the way there. And when he drove, and he saw something he wanted me to see, he pointed his finger and turned the wheel that direction. He kept saying sorry when I jumped. I thought we’d fall off the mountain or hit somebody. Luckily the roads were pretty empty.

I wanted to get out of there, so I waited in the truck. He and the sales guy loaded the varnish. He didn’t ask me to help. I thought then that maybe he just wanted company. He’d been hiding out up there in the shack. He was the wild man of the forest.

The sales guy asked me my name, and I stared past him at the dirt road. I didn’t respond and he looked mad. I just wanted to get out of there. I asked Trippy could we go now. He took an old flat big-rig truck tire with the guy, and they set it in the back. Trippy said it would do for a swing. Lobo sat on the rusty floorboard and panted. Light showed through the holes. The sales guy called me a stuck up little. He didn’t get a
chance to finish though, because Trippy screamed thank you really loud and walked toward him, so that he took a couple steps back.

He went back in and bought paintbrushes when I reminded him. He carried three boxes of them to the car alone. He took me where I wanted to go. I got a red down jacket and long underwear at St. Joseph’s Thrift. I bought a pack of new socks at the dime store and regular mittens I could cut the tips off of. I thought if I ever got rich I would buy a new pair of socks every day.

Trippy was fun in the store. He bought a length of leather he found at the thrift shop and a plastic Jesus for the Chevy’s dash. He laughed when I looked, and he told me it was for just in case. He said that everyone in Puerto Rico used them. He bought a book on California wild flowers I had looked at and put back down. He handed it to me at the car. He said Saila and I could go plant identifying.

I end up painting varnish on the porch of my cabin with the red-haired girl who spent time with Trippy. She helped us even though the campers were only supposed to do their own cabins. Once she came to me while I was sitting on the porch swing by the lodge. Trippy and Brice had built it out of logs last year.

She said she lived in Redlands and could borrow her mother’s Volvo so it wouldn’t be a hike to get to the Pines to see Trippy. She’d asked Saila if she could stay up here after the break, but Saila said it was probably a bad idea. She said Saila didn’t like her. She said Saila only seemed nice to me, and I’d find out otherwise in time. I thought it was a first strike to get me to like her instead. I figured I couldn’t trust her. What would she say about me to somebody else then? I wrote her off.
I picked up my tea and walked back to the kitchen. Saila said all the cooking would be easier in a week and a half when they hired a second helper. People started complaining to her, and she said to them to come and help if the meal was late. Sometimes people did and sometimes they didn’t. I said I felt like I couldn’t even look at another stack of carrots. Saila poured a bucket of potatoes in front of me, and I stuck my tongue out at her. She took another bowl from the cupboard. She’d made some brownies for us. We ate the whole tray.

I sat outside on the swing because I felt bloated and couldn’t get to my cabin. Saila kept on working. She shooed me out of there. Trippy’s girl was still there. She was almost barefoot. She swung a gold colored sandal on her toes. Her polish matched her sandals, and she looked cleaner than I have ever felt. She wanted to know how to get closer to Trippy this week. She sighed as she was stretching. She asked me what he thought about. She was so clean looking. I felt like a worn out shoe, or something somebody had dragged up from the bottom of the ocean. I felt like my mouth was full of sea urchin spines. I couldn’t think what to say to a girl like that.

Saila and I read the only paperback we found, in the camp in her room at night and out loud to each other, *Rosemary’s Baby*. It was something to do. A freaky guy from some nudist colony in Big Sur left it here after their conference. Sometimes I just slept in her room, if I fell asleep while she read.

Brice showed up one morning early, and Saila put him to work. She told him Moon had shown up. He said he was ok with it. Saila told me she was the one with red hair, and I nodded. I knew what that meant. He was older, more Saila’s age.
The first thing he told me was that he was a Hare Krishna for four months until his parents got Trippy to pretend to convert and kidnap him. They had spent a lot of money deprogramming him. He wanted to give me some good food recipes for the kitchen. That’s what he missed. Krishna food. Sweet cakes and yams. Beans and veggies. He cooked at the temple in Palms.

It was his father who paid for Trippy’s snowboarding trip here, as a thank you for going into the temple and saving Brice. He invited me to the hot tub. The guy was like the coffee brand we used at the Pines, *Chock full o’ Nuts*. I had to work in the kitchen with him and hear about Krishna, and now he wanted to sit in hot water with me. I’m not a big smiler, but I smiled without saying ok. Trippy bristled when he walked in and saw Brice. He told him Moon was around. Brice shrugged his shoulders and opened a can of kidney beans.

Trippy told me later that night that Brice once cut his arms up over a girl before the Krishna phase. “Poor Moon,” was all I said. He asked me if I was going to the hot tub like Brice asked. I said I liked it where I was. We were in his room above the loft. It was tiny, but a skylight opened a little for air. He had a comforter of calico patches in star shapes, a guitar that wasn’t dusty, and a few books. He was warning me about being careful with Brice in private. That’s all. He kissed me once, but that was it.

The last camper’s morning, I helped Brice make sack lunches for the campers’ bus ride home. We had a week to rest before the Girl Scout troops came. Trippy was watching me make sandwiches. Moon walked by. She didn’t say goodbye to Brice. Moon went outside with Trippy. They were talking. Moon wasn’t happy. Trippy shook his head back and forth. Finally, she hit his chest with her fist and walked away.
Trippy nodded to Brice, saying he had to take me somewhere, a hike. Brice said lunch was mostly covered, and Trippy called Lobo. We walked towards the mountains. Trippy told me he felt bad about Brice always being in the kitchen with me. He asked if I liked him. I didn’t answer.

We walked a long way up the mountain. We stopped for a rest. Lobo kept going. Trippy bit a coffee bean in half and put another in his mouth. It was a nervous habit. He kept them in his shirt pocket, to wake himself up, if he got too spaced.

“You’re always laughing with Brice,” Trippy said. He told me that I didn’t laugh with him. I told him he didn’t say funny things.

“You’ll like my mom,” Trippy said next. He told me he thought I ought to stay with them between summer and Christmas. I ought to get time to be a kid. He pointed up in the air at a long hammock strung between four pines. He told me this was where he used to come to get away. He didn’t mind, though, if I wanted to come here sometimes. Just for somewhere to be alone and think. He said it was mine now. No one had offered me such a thing for a long time. I felt like crying.

I felt rooted. I felt happy too. Trippy thought I was okay. I could be worth something. I didn’t have to be that girl anymore. I could be worth something. He was giving me a gift. I put a finger through one of his belt loops. He said I could climb up here where no one could find me sometimes if I wanted. Just take in the air and the stars.
TRAVELING LIGHT

We were traveling light. Before this we were somewhere else. And before that there was another place. And it went on like that until it stopped. But this is a story about when we were all still going. A time when Frank held his hand over my mother’s face, with his fingers slightly spread, to make the light coming in through the teak framed windows catch over her eyes. When I stood in the doorway with a hermit crab’s shell in my hands, watching my parents asleep on the plain cotton sheets. When I watched the white cotton curtains move in the breeze.

My father had called in all his markers. He had put himself on the line and succeeded somewhat. We were still here. We were still moving. It was dry and cool in the summer months. A slight breeze. A northeast monsoon. But this wasn’t summer yet, though the seasons were different here, and it had rained. And so we waited. Something would blow the rain away.

On a clear day we had seen a monk. He seemed unhurried, though he walked briskly in his flat sandals and loose robes. Wrapped in ripples of cloth, he looked like a river walking. On foot, he’d probably beat the bus to Wat from Bangkok by twenty minutes. We had seen the people on the bus, crammed like herring together, inching along the congested road. We had traveled North to Chiang Mai on the sleeper from Bangkok. We had noticed the silence of the hills interrupted by the chimes of the big bells of Doi Stuhep. We had smelled the sulfurous Hot Springs. We paid our respects to the Buddha’s relics. We waited for a break in the rain.
Frank blew lightly on my mother’s face and she opened her eyes. She closed them again. Frank blew again and tickled her arm. She opened her eyes to see who it was. When she saw, she smiled and wiggled out from under our father’s sleeping arm. She sat up, brushed a hand through her wavy hair, and then brushed a hand through his. She was telling him what a good thing it was to be woken from a sleepy odd place by a handsome young man.

He was eleven, so I was nine. This is how I measured my age. I was always two years younger than Frank. I thought of his birthday first. It was how my mother marked time. By the time before and the time after she was a mother. I was nine already. She went to the bidet in the little bathroom, which was just a rigged up old plastic bucket and a rubber hose that looked like it came out of an engine. We cleaned up our crayons and paints, and our father went back to his light sounding snoring.

Frank poked my father with his finger, then sat and bounced on the bed slightly. My father opened one eye. He told us we ought to go up into the hills to find flowers for the lunch table, although it was already late in the afternoon. “It’s a lazy day. Be lazy,” he said. I wanted to show him my hermit crab; it was big and it had walked right into the hut through the archway, covered with its silk sheet door. And I didn’t want to show him my hermit crab. I wanted a secret, but I wanted to share. Frank had moved back away from the bed and motioned for me to do the same. So I was outside the hut. I hoped things would stay nice.

Frank’s Chinese dragon tattoo, on the back of his left shoulder, stood out blue and green against his tan. It was a crazy birthday gift from our father, something to help Frank carry himself with more confidence. Frank said he wanted one once. And
then my father teased him with it for a year or so, but he usually indulged Frank’s emotions when it came to his masculinity. It was cheap to get a local umbrella painter to paint the design on.

The steam flames from its nostrils looked like orange waves, and his platinum hair was almost white, as he walked into the beginnings of a cloud break and sunny haze with me. He was walking flat-footed and open, on the balls of his feet, in imitation of a local Thai fisherman. Frank played at being the one who got out of his boat to bring us fish and a fish basket. That was his favorite one to be like.

My mother bought the basket because Frank liked it. The fisherman had pointed to the stream and said, “From Ping,” as we looked at the flow of water from the hills. My mother said, “Ping River?” and the fisherman had smiled, showing his few remaining teeth.

She was wearing her sunglasses, and to me she looked like a movie star. He was old, easy going. I liked the glitter on the water, and the smell of fish and sugarcane. I liked the way he smiled at us all.

She had haggled with other boatmen for the dinner fish the day before. But she still hadn’t cooked them. We were a day behind on the cooking. We had been here two days and we had just finished the snacks we brought from home.

We woke up early everyday but stayed quiet, waiting for our parents to wake up. In the hut we ate some leftovers from the train, which is a very rude thing to do when you are in Thailand. Wasting is a sign of wealth and prosperity and of fortune from the Buddha. If you hoarded food, your luck turned bad. But my mother packed our
leftovers from the train ride. "Here, Claire, put cheese in your pocket," she said. If my father had seen it, he would have stopped her. He wanted to feel he could provide for us. We could waste things.

She was saying the words he had taught her. Saying the two phrases she knew: *Phom kam lang la* (I am looking for...) and *Fang pai* (too expensive). She was moving her hands out from her face and pressing her cheeks together, her lips squished together like a fish blowing bubbles, so that the boatmen laughed, and the fisherman gave her the basket and the fish for only the price of the fish. She had that way with people. And she looked self-satisfied as she handed the basket to Frank. And I waved to the fish-man goodbye, wishing things could be like I felt then all the time. People smiling, the smells of live fish and sugarcane, my mother's face all shiny.

We hiked up the low mountains through the thorny shrubs, stunted trees, bamboo, and all the spare grass, until we could see the evergreens in the distance. Frank had wanted to bicycle around Chaing Mai on the rented bicycles that were very rickety. But my father had seen other tourists, inexperienced and wobbly, struggling with the road and being laughed at. They were a source of amusement to the locals. Children ran down the street laughing and pointing at the *farangs*, foreigners. My father was here partly for business and had his dignity to protect. Life had been throwing him a glitch. And it made him act funny sometimes. This was a working vacation. He needed to make some money.

And on top of that, his wife was maybe losing her mind for a while again. Before he decided to take us here we were on another Air Force base. He had looked around the hospital room and thought that it was not really set up for military wives,
and gossip was getting around. The Air Force transferred her to a full care facility. He thought about everything. Maybe he thought of his far away wife and wondered what to do for her.

The clothing he sent to her was stacked against the closet door when we got to visit. My cousin was there, talking to her. Every day, after she left her high school, she put makeup on my mother, hoping for a response. She said all that my mother needed was some good sea air and then patted my father on the back. She put lipstick on my mother. My mother watched the wall. My cousin looked at her own reflection in her compact. She put some lipstick on her lips. My father decided it was time to change the scenery, time to change his luck too.

He would buy some things and bring them to California. Painted umbrellas. Thai silver. Folk art. We were traveling light. Light travelers. One dollar to sixty baht was the balance of our lives. Less than a dollar for each umbrella he bought. It would work out. He could ship them to America, paying more for the postage than the product. It was how he got money to support us. At least that is how I want to remember it.

A bottle of beer and a worn deck of Bee brand playing cards fixed things. He drained the beer, lobbed the bottle into a metal trash can, and with two fingers held stiff, turned over a card. Then he gathered us together. At least that is how I imagined it. That was how my father found the money to move around.

Frank and I patrolled the hills for flowers. Frank listened for birds, stopping to point out a bird calling, “Chow wit” every three or four seconds. He ripped his jungle green trousers trying to find the elusive bird. “Chow wit, chow wit, chow wit,” chided
the bird. He called it a skulker, and then he pointed to a black and white bird with a flash of chestnut on his wings, high up on a branch.

I left half of a butter sandwich on a rock, and when we got back from chasing the bird it was too late. It was being devoured by an army of vicious red ants. It was quite beyond retrieval. I remember a bunch of little things like that, as long as Frank is still there in them.

We found some wind flowers and stole them from the yellow and black tiny moths mother called butter moths, because they fly about it when the butter is open on the table outside. The low clouds lifted. I liked to walk down the hill to the hut, knowing we were all there together. I liked the place empty, except for us. I liked the way the shutters in the hut had started to lose their paint on the slats. I liked the low clouds sometimes. The water murky and green. Moss on moss, like long shag carpet, around the edges of the stream. I liked running down the hill and screaming with Frank. And sometimes looking at our fish in the basket, anchored to the side of the stream, alive and swimming.

Frank dropped the flowers on the porch and took my hand; my parents were making loud noises that weren’t unhappy but that meant for us to stay out. We went to the sea to look for more hermit crabs near the clear water. Frank held one very still until it poked out of its red and brown shell, insect looking, and old as the world. One pinched Frank and he screamed like a girl, and I laughed and ran backwards. Frank looked at me and then laughed too. He was the one who showed me how to pick a crab up so it couldn’t touch me, how to make it harmless.
Later, I grabbed his wrist to show him a starfish with long brown arms circling in my hand. He pushed me into the shallow water for revenge, and we rolled over one another until he pinned me down and then let me up. The starfish was lost back to the sea. Frank told me that we were safe and that this was a good day. We walked to the hammock strung between two posts near the hut and climb in to sleep.

Twilight. Lunch forgotten. Frank knocks on the side of the arch that is our door. I stand by Frank as he looks at our mother. She’s so beautiful, he tells me and shakes his head. I feel lumpy. I stand taller than Frank, who has pretty girlish eyelashes. We are backwards. Our mother tells us we are getting all the wrong features. Frank is pretty faced like my mother; I look like my father with my invisible eyelashes. His invisible girl.

Frank went to hook up the generator father brought with him, since he couldn’t go a day without his jazz. He put on Sketches of Spain. The stars were coming out in droves. My mother came out, yawning in the archway. Music was reason enough to stir in the subtropical wet. She wandered out to steam large prawns she bought near the peninsula, as I set the table. Cicadas made their leg rubbing noises. My father followed her and brushed the neckline of her dress with one finger. They kissed. After the prawns steamed, they set them to cool, and then they walked to the beach.

When they came back, my mother was soaking wet and she was laughing. Years later and in memory, I can still smell saltiness as she leans in close to Frank and rests a hand momentarily on his shoulder. My father had a warm smell of basil and sweat, and that smell of bodies when they are sticky with the humidity. His large frame went brushing through the silk-curtain-doorway of our hut and then stepped out into the
Tiki-torch light Frank had lit, holding a handful of albums. He was rested and happy. He flame-cooked some Bangus, a bony fish he caught from the beach the day before. "Claire," he had said to me, "why don't you come fish?" But I didn't want to fish. We couldn't afford to throw them back anymore.

My mother sautéed in her wine some long thin seaweed and salt tasting greens we gathered from the edible rushes by the stream near our bungalow. Frank smashed large almond-shaped coconuts with a gray rock. Mother and I drank the milky juice, letting it spill down our chests. My mother laughed as the liquid spilled down her dress. Purple flowers and pink-red steamed prawns, Bangus, seaweed, and candlelight were breakfast for my parents.

Suddenly, the light yellow-skinned rose apples with the crisp texture of pears appeared from a box. Apples I loved came from out of nowhere like magic. My father smiled. He turned the apple in his hand. He said the prawns were for Frank, and the apples for Claire. And after the meal, mother would give me something else. Our birthdays were two years but only a few days apart. November children. I know everything here sounds so nice. But usually it was for a while. Tides turn. We were always at sea with my mother.

My father put Blue Train on the record player, which meant it was time to eat. My mother steamed some eggs with shrimp water, poking holes in them first to get them salty. They sat in the bowl on the table. Eggs. My father set the bowl next to me. Their speckled roundness made me feel queasy. Eggs.

"Have an egg, Claire," my father said.

"She doesn't eat them," mother said.
My father said these aren’t American eggs, they are from ducks, and that I needed to try new things. I don’t like new things. I gave up and took an egg from the bowl and peeled part of it. My mother said see with a long e-sound. The doctor at my mother’s hospital gave us shots before we came here. Malaria. Typhus. He poked about and said I had to eat. “She’s got a problem, and eggs are what she needs,” the doctor said. I just want to be thin like my mother. My mother took it from my plate and ate it, saying I looked fine for a change. The doctor was silly. Nothing was really wrong with her daughter. My father pushed back his chair.

“She has to eat protein,” he said.

I began eating the greens. I watched my mother close and open her fists at him, with the hurt anger she gets when he talks harshly, anger I had not seen since before she went into the hospital. To punish him, my father had shouted at the time, but it was always more than that. She was angry because he took a contract to safety check Bell Huey helicopters, left over from the war in Vietnam, before they sold them or changed them or something. But her upset was bigger than that and harder to reach, and he was working for the Air Force again. She had married the musician in him, not the soldier, she said. Her fist hit the table and the record skipped two lines. I wanted things to calm down.

My mother said, “Why should she eat your killings?”

She had said it many times; we are cannibals living off the flesh of napalmed teenagers. She accused him of taking government kickbacks when they first came out. Everyone knew most of those helicopters never even made it to the ground safely. They blew up. In a real firefight they didn’t last five seconds. They could be taken down
with a machine gun. And this is how she talked to him about it, during the war, when she was in the hospital a lot more.

We thought those times were over. When she looked at the television and cried and started not even hearing Frank’s voice anymore. She would go blank for a second and then come back. The war touched something small and sharp and painful inside her. It was like how I felt at dinner when I looked at the egg as if my birthday, my life, and the whole world were ruined in an instant. He didn’t get that. He missed the build up of her emotions. He was always surprised by her outbursts. He looked wounded even. But I wasn’t. I held my mother’s anger inside me. It was big. And everyone was getting nervous.

Her hands flew about her face, and she talked to him like a little child. Softly, so he couldn’t hear her. It embarrassed him, I think, because he turned bright red even more than his sunburn. He went close and poured her a glass of water. Frank stood up and fanned her with his hands. I pulled my hair and chewed the ends of some of it.

Once when I was really little, my father took me to Sears to get some candy. They had these display cases with different candy you could see through the glass. The lady saw me chewing the ends of my hair and said if I kept at it, a huge hairball would form in my stomach and twist up my insides, so that I wouldn’t even want candy anymore. I didn’t want any candy then. My father got angry and told the woman she was awful: What was her problem? Was it any good scaring me? He asked for some Swedish Fish. I stopped chewing my hair after that, but right then I didn’t care. I chewed my hair.

“It shouldn’t be that easy,” mother said.
"Claire's starving herself," my father said.

"And President Johnson was a major stockholder in them," mother went on.

She was looking at Frank, and waiting for him to take her side like he does in everything. He just looked down at his plate of food. The incident had occurred that should not have occurred. I stayed seated. By now I was idly picking apart a table decoration. This was all before I learned to be careful, before I learned the art of the conditional. Before I knew how things could change. I had picked up an egg and put it down. I flattered myself that I was on the edge of something, and I knew something then. The why of it was coming to me if I had just ate the egg, but I didn't.

Frank stood up straight and brushed like there was grass on his legs, and walked to the open door of the hut. He brought out a local bottle of cola. Some real things had happened lately, but my mother had gone back inside herself again. She was older. No longer traveling as light. Oblivious to me. Oblivious to Frank. Oblivious even to her husband.

She stared at the place beyond us where she went for days sometimes. My father got up and opened a box on the table. He took a beer from its darkened interior. He didn't offer her any. He ignored her like she was invisible. It took a while for him to drink. My mother didn't look at us. It was only when Frank sat down across the table that she looked up, and that was for the cola. She looked up as he poured her the cola: flat, warm, and sweet. It sat there. She had hesitated. She had gone her own way. She had made her own life at the hospital. She had waited for a break in the rain.

When I am away from this, I tend to see it slow, when it was actually fast. My father plopped a pink prawn on my white plate. "Eat." The shrimp looked so
completely dead to me. Its black eye was wide open. I picked the flecks of red roe from the back of its head. I thought how my father’s old helicopters look squat and round, like fat bumblebees. Eggs have nothing to do with war. They just disagree with me.

Maybe that was my thought back then, the one I couldn’t reach. The grass from the place where the sand met the earth, between the bungalow and the beach smelled vaguely of vanilla and sugar. Why couldn’t my mother at least pretend to act normal?

My mother’s hands were floating around her face as if she were going to go into an emotional seizure. My father told her that her dress was beautiful. Its tones brought out the olive in her skin and her chocolate hair. He took her hands and kissed them. He told her he wants to make us more safe. That it’s our family that matters. The rest of the world will go on, but his job is to help to at least ease a larger wrong. He is making the helicopters safer; he can’t control everything the government wants, and please, it’s the children’s birthdays.

I felt the burn on my back from the sun and thought of the sea. I tried to fade into nature. The cicadas were rubbing their legs together. The sound of the stream was something: water over water over rock had distracted me. I thought of the large bamboo basket in the stream where Frank kept his fishes alive under the water. I wondered what it would be like to be a fish. Simple. At night, sometimes I snuck out and let the fish go.

It’s Frank’s real birthday. November sixth is today. Mine was before his, but we always celebrate them together. We are waiting for the candles to float down the stream. Small floats, bedecked with candles, were set afloat until the full moon, during
the Loy Krathong festival every year. Candles were sent down the river to pay homage to the goddess of the river. It was an act of thanks for the water that the rivers provided during the rainy monsoon. It was also a day to feel sorry for when you had dirtied the river water. To us they were our own special birthday candles. Our mother had told us so. We were waiting for our candles.

My father puts a glass of white wine to my mother’s lips. She takes a drink of the table wine and a pill he puts in her mouth. She looks up into the sky. She rests her head in her hands. She is praying out loud for God to spare her from having another child. We all know she is a little bit pregnant because she wanted to sleep through the morning when she usually jumped up. It had been that way with Frank and with me. Breezes blew through the trees. Twigs snapped. My father took her wrist and kissed it. He told her he was a man doing his best in a messed up universe. My mother was twenty-eight. My father was twenty-nine.

He kissed. He held her hands together as if they were in prayer, kissing them. His gesture was for forgiveness. He said that another child would be a blessing, good karma for us. Her tummy protruded a little, and she was vain. Upset. Her stomach was usually so much flatter than mine has ever been. But it was more than that.

“Upset stomach?” my father asked her.

Frank got up and flipped the record over. Then he handed the prawns to our father, watched mother calm down, and we ate together. She drank another glass of wine and poured a little more for herself, and mixed a little into our water glasses. We drank. Frogs from the stream croaked.

“Claire,” she said, holding out her arms.
I went to her, but she didn’t hug me. Her arms lifted over her head instead, as she rose with an elegant stretch. She passed right by me and put an album I didn’t know on the player, cranking the volume as loud as she could. My father finished his meal as the music blared. Mother and daughter. My mother led me to the wood planking beneath the bungalow. Frank trailed after.

On the grass my mother claps her hands and begins to dance with Frank instead of me. The dance yields us to pleasantness. It yields us to silence. I watch as Frank presses next to her. My father is suddenly behind me. He goes and taps Frank’s shoulder. Mother follows in my father’s steps.

They bend and sway and pull tight together as feet follow feet. Heads up, proud, they are like the matador who stiffens the moment before he kills the bull. When the forty-five stops she is wrapped in his embrace. Frank claps. I clap. My mother bows. Frank throws an arm around my shoulder. We start to breathe better again.

“Your mother learned the tango for you,” my father says, looking at me. I know who taught her it, and I frown. He pretends not to notice, but moves away, like I’m a hot fire about to burn him.

He went back to the generator. The needle picked up, and the music began again. Frank and I tried to dance. I was happy but uncoordinated. Frank always caught on faster than I did. Mother explained it to me in pieces, holding my hands. She tried. We danced, listening to the music until we were hot in the humid air.

I couldn’t remember the last time she let me be that close to her. She would only brush her hand through my hair and sigh at me. What a mess I was, she would say, and shake her head. I’d probably fill out like my cousin did. She was going to be a
dancer until her breasts got too big. I had nubs already. I would never be a dancer. She had wanted me to be a dancer.

Tired of her feet getting stepped on, my mother kissed my head and let me go. We raced to the beach to swim. Frank passed us and jumped in first. My father took off his *phanung*, colorful breaches. I saw his large form as it entered the water. Frank found me.

Father spouted water from his mouth like a whale. Mother swam around him, like a seal doing the tango. They looked happy, and I felt mad. I wasn’t happy. I floated on my back with my ears under water, remembering the tango. I was in the room the day my cousin taught my father that dance.

She had a secret with my mother and Frank. She made me go outside, alone, at what we called then the nervous hospital. I gardened and pulled weeds with a girl my age who wouldn’t speak. The nurse, watching from the bench, finished eating the sandwich she had for her lunch and pulled the silent girl away. She complimented me on my row of radish seeds because they were very straight. I had wetted a string. The seeds clung to it. I eased it into the depression I had made. The row would grow straight.

I imagined my cousin and my mother’s bodies, dancing together in matching short black pumps. My mother was in a white hospital gown. My cousin was in a long sleek visiting dress bought by my father. They were moving to music in long white hallways. White hospital corners. Made beds. They were dancing, showing me another way of being a woman.
My father crouched in the water that was as blue as my cousin’s eyes. Blue as when I caught them kissing, like grown-ups, in the corridor of the hospital. I thought if my father ever kissed me like that I would crumble up and die. And then my father caught my eye and pushed my cousin away a bit. Her eyes still closed. Her lips still pursed as I ran down the corridor.

I decided to forget. For a while I felt right, and then I didn’t. I crumbled up and died anyway. Knowing about their kissing made me different. I had a secret. I was different. My father splashed me. He picked me up, and I paled as he put me on his shoulder. I put my feet on his shoulders as he walked until the water touched his ears. He was standing ears deep in water. Hands gripped my ankles. He let me go. I looked for Frank and mother. I was beginning to understand things.

“I’ll catch you,” Frank said. My mother opened up her arms. I asked my father to throw me as far as he could into the starry night sky. We were traveling light. Light travelers. We were traveling light.
Sometimes I see things that just aren’t there. I live in two places at once. A rock just isn’t a rock; it looks like something else. And I’m never too sure how I feel about being someplace. Maybe I have been too many places. I don’t know. Like I’m here with Hugh, but I keep thinking about my first boyfriend, Trippy, and my brother, Frank. I should be thinking about Hugh. I don’t know how it got started, but I spend more time thinking about what is not here. Sometimes I think I have always been this way.

Today I’m a little hungry, so I tell Hugh the Devil’s Post Pile looks like vermicelli noodles. The rocks in the mountain look like gigantic, uncooked strips of sun-dried tomato pasta that were thrown together at odd angles. Hugh has been pretty agreeable lately. He sees it too and nods his head. He says he likes all the red angles thrown against the sky. We are up near the middle fork of the San Joaquin River in the Sierras. Yellow pines and scrub brush stand here and there among the rocks.

It smells like the dryness just after it rains, and the sun has been out the whole next day. It’s quiet and terribly beautiful. Hugh has some peyote in his pocket. He found it in my old tin box I use for clove cigarettes; the one with the purple and blue flowers on it that my mother used to keep her Gauloise cigarettes in. I think it was handmade in Chiapas for her.

My dad wooed her with trinkets. He paid her compliments and gave her things for a while before she went out with him. She wasn’t supposed to be dating yet. Her mother was a stern Catholic. He was handsome, though, and it made her brave enough
to sneak around and be with him. She was young. He was young and handsome. She had trouble after they met. She may have had trouble before. I don’t know for sure if she regretted it all or not. She loved Frank.

The peyote came to me in the mail as a gift from my father. He is somewhere in the southwest this week, working on some piece of airplane for somebody somewhere, adjusting designs to make the war machines more efficient. I got a postcard too. Starla walked it over to the Lemon Twist for me. She liked my new digs. She gave me a solid beeswax candle and a lavender plant. She said Hugh was a keeper and to hold on to him. She was still getting a check from the foster care and her bills were lower.

On the back of the postcard it said, "It’s hot here-Sebastian." Chili peppers are big in New Mexico, so maybe he is there, poking around White Sands. The postmark was all smeared in black ink. When I got the peyote, I just tossed it in the glove box and tried to forget it. I mean it’s weird, having a dad who does more drugs than you do. I don’t know what makes him think he is right to be doing this kind of stuff.

Starla’s husband, Sky, used to have these conversations about the Goddess and Carl Jung with me. He went to a bookshop that had a bunch of books like that. Sky was someone who wanted to be talked to. He asked pointed questions that I felt compelled to answer sometimes, since I lived under his roof. I was kind of like his kid. He kind of kept me at a distance sometimes, and sometimes I think things felt too close. I think there was a little attraction on both our parts, but we both knew better. Now that I had moved, I didn’t have to talk so much.

I told him about my father freaking out on me and taking off when I lived there. He told me to empty myself of being all that stuff that happened, so I could make room
for a new me. I thought becoming a new me was scary. I decided I was okay the way I was. I was glad when I moved in with Hugh because Sky wanted these stupid intense conversations about feelings.

My memories surface anyway though. They make no sense, and they wear me out sometimes. Sky told me he went off into the desert once to find his Chakras, these circle vision things he read about in a book. They were supposed to be blue, green or white in color. He said he saw one out in the Mojave off of Route 66, and I believe he thought he did.

But it probably was just heat stroke, or some light reflecting off of an old glass soda bottle. He was probably just thirsty; that’s what Hugh said when I told him. I tell Hugh a myth I read about the Post Pile. An Indian captured a bear cub and its mother clawed the mountains trying to reach her cub. The Indian was on top of the mountain, holding on to her cub. The Indian shot arrows and killed the bear mother, and the baby slipped from his grasp and fell to its death. We look at the markings in the piles, all claw ravaged and deep, and I think now that this was how I felt when my father left. It’s why I still won’t let him back in, even though now he is trying.

Sky would be waiting at the beach for me some days. Sitting in his Volkswagen bus with coffee and Honeyed Jagermeister to warm me up after I came in from the waves. I regretted taking the lift, when he started talking psychology with me on the ride home. I liked not having to take the bus back though. It was his surfboard I was using.

Still, my head felt full of confusion. Junked up, as Hugh would say. I just kind of nodded my head, and I felt stupid. I wondered if he even understood what he was
saying from these books. I’d get home and walk in the back gate by the outdoor shower he made out of redwood. It nested near a huge old tree. I’d stand there and rinse off the salt water.

I’d take showers out there after I was gardening or when his wife was lounging on the porch. She complained to me about water conservation even when I was showering quickly. She wanted me to shower at school to save money, but on weekends I couldn’t. I didn’t like smelling for two days. I wished I could relax and take a real shower.

Hugh wonders if we should do the peyote and I say no. Trippy told me peyote makes you feel dry. Like when you are drinking a regular beer at a party and then realize it turned out to be malt liquor in the morning. It gets you spinning fast. He told me sometimes these jerks, that just wanted to get in a girls’ pants would switch regular to malt on them because it tastes the same but gets you drunk faster. I tell Hugh. Hugh says that never happens to him.

I can hear Hugh’s feet making crunch noises on the shale behind me as it breaks underfoot. He is following my lead. He’s the first person I think I could be happy with as I get old. He smells the peyote. I take it and show him the white fuzz around the middle and the sides, saying its arsenic. You have to pull the white fuzz out.

Hugh looks like he has just stubbed a toe. His upper legs are long, and he doesn’t always see where he places his feet, so I’ve seen him stumble often. I feel like if I turn my back on him for a second something will happen to him. I try to pick out the fuzz with my fingers, but it’s firmly attached. There is arsenic in the ocean. It’s just
one of its elements. That's one of the things I remember from what little time I spent in high school.

I touch the peyote to my lips and smell it for hints of the sea. It smells earthy, like musty fungus and dirt. Hugh looks worried like he thinks I will swallow it, but I figure he deserves to sweat it for taking it out of the car without asking and frightening me. I wait awhile before I put it in my pocket. His mouth opens and then it shuts.

Hugh has this lust for story. He tells me he wants me to tell him everything about me. I know the look on his face. He wants more. He usually bites his lower lip when he is frustrated with me. Hugh is biting his lip. He tells me he feels like I'm hiding something from him. I believe him because that is his style. I just want to think about us now and honeymoon. Hugh wants to know how I feel. It's yucky.

Hugh and I decided to make it up here in the Fairlane on Saturday after his dad's will was read. Hugh now owns the coffee and tea bar we work at. We are glad his stepmother didn't get a share because now we are free. We can put out the closed sign when we want. Maybe she will have to get a job now and start dealing with the world.

We are going to put in a shower with Sky's help, in the back room, so there isn't a reason to go to his old house. We already moved Hugh's stuff into the storage room. Hugh can listen about other places on his dad's old wireless. I can read through some books on *Chakras*, and start teasing Sky with ideas if I want. It smells good sleeping near the burlap sacks of coffee beans. We are away from the weird tension at Hugh's stepmother's house.

I felt some surprise when I saw the Devil's Post Pile again. Grayish glassy pumice flats, cinder red cones, U-shaped canyons and hanging valleys of scrapped and
polished rock faces had all faded into childhood memory. When I was nine, I looked up at all that reddish stony stuff, and saw the same stuff in chips of shale on the ground and was overwhelmed.

At nine I took the devil seriously, and at first I thought it was his house. The vertical red pillars looked like the closed gates of hell. I thought that the cadmium rocks would open and then close and swallow me. There would be nothing left. I'd be dancing in hot red metal shoes, like in a fairy tale I read, or burning endlessly in Christ’s eternal love. I was sure I had committed thousands of unpardonable sins just by existing. All that red that was thrown up against the blue sky made it hard to breathe. I tried to think graceful and spiritual thoughts.

Then my father’s sleeve brushed across my shoulder. I was mad at him for taking us here because my mother didn’t want to come back to America. She got here and started getting bad again, at the military base. They found another hospital, and he signed her in. I wanted to be back with her and my brother in my grandmother’s single flat in France. I wanted to laugh, play with the neighborhood kids.

But not to be stuck for a while on another Air Force base with military brats from all over. I never learned to interact or be real friends with them. Frank and I just stuck together. We ditched class and ran around outside. Teachers complained, but my father didn’t care. He said good for us. We can learn from the school of life. Get off my kids’ backs. I don’t need you climbing my shit. They can do what they want.

My father was upsetting me, here in this strange place. He was talking about something I didn’t want to listen to. He was saying that my mother was getting further away from us lately. We couldn’t be sure she would always be with us. He said maybe
God needed her more, somewhere in the space she went to in her mind when she left us. I wanted to tell him to stop talking bad about her. I wanted to hit him.

Frank put his hands over his ears while my father talked about it and tears came. Seeing Frank get upset made it even worse, and before I could control my head I wished my father was dead. It was the first time in my life I knew for positive that I was a very bad person.

I had thought it before, when my mother didn’t get better. Like if I had been a better daughter, she would be happy, but then I was sure I was evil. Those feelings came back to me standing there next to Hugh. I couldn’t talk about them though.

I was little, waiting to be consumed by flames, but nothing happened. Then I knew what I was feeling. I remembered how Frank squeezed my hand and I was happy. The devil didn’t want me, or he would have taken me then. Maybe there was no devil. It was just this beautiful place, and he couldn’t ruin that the whole way for Frank and me. Nothing bad is happening today either. The devil must be lost under the sea, fighting with Neptune over that pitchfork scepter.

I get up at five a.m. and go surfing some days. I like to be up before Hugh, so I can clear my head and get ready to circumvent his curiosity. I am loved, and I know what this love is. That’s enough. The most frightening thing in life is to come face to face with your own self. Hugh just wants to come face to face with my life instead. I think he should listen to his own feelings. Maybe it will get better when he is more used to his dad being gone.

By now I am grinding my foot in shards of red on the ground, stirring up dust. I tell Hugh scientists say the earth is cooling. Its crust was getting colder day by day, but
now scientists say the surface of the globe is warming up. He says those two things don’t necessarily affect each other. He hands me some water. I kiss him and say I want to take my own walk. He lets me go and I wander off in the rocks to find a comfortable place to daydream.

I’m a big doubter about spirits and things. My mother prayed and it didn’t change much for her in her life. It made me mad for a long time. Being older, and here this time, I feel stronger. I still feel an affinity for this place. It was where I stopped worrying about God or the devil. The red uneven shale looks so haphazard, like a jigsaw puzzle in red just out of the box, like my head feels most of the time. The blues in the sky are powdery. The rocks jutting into the cloudy sky seem set down here by someone with great intentions. Sometimes I’d like there to be a God. I don’t know.

Somebody told me the Pile was made out of coolness. It stopped being cold. A loose iceberg fell down and cut a hole in the hills. I know that isn’t true. It was first formed by volcanic heat. Lava shot out of the ground. Pure lava formed the center of the volcano and all the ash and debris left around the sides formed the mountain. The mountain was washed away by an ancient river and left this center, this volcanic core that is the Pile. That is something I could tell Hugh.

Hugh tells me about Pan Gu, a god in a Chinese fourth century myth that burst forth from an egg, how he held the two pieces of egg apart for six thousand years till he got bored. He threw the top piece up and it became the sky. The bottom was the earth and he carved out all the rivers with a spoon. He made hills with the earth he scooped out. He formed animals from dust. But the humans they say were already here. They came from the fleas on his head. Hugh is like that lately, a flea biting.
Hugh had decided to go with me to wherever my important life stuff has happened. My head was pulling me to the Devil’s Post Pile as if I were holding what Sky called my spirit guide’s guiding hand. Hugh is still impatient. He thinks details create intimacy. I think time creates this. We’ve known each other a few months now. We’ve been married for about that long too.

Before, I could go sit outside on a crate in the backyard when things got too warm, out near the chicken coop Sky built for his wife. I could find an egg and hold it. They were so white they looked blue and speckled lightly with brown. They were cool feeling, like what I thought the temperature must have felt like in the beginning of the world. Eating eggs always made me feel queasy. But I didn’t mind holding them.

It’s warm out so I take off my overshirt; crumpling it for a pillow, I lie down on the shale. It reminds me of Spanish clay roof tiles. I remember once watching some kids make adobe bricks out in Mexico once, mixing the clay and dirt and water together to the right consistency. They poured it into simple molds and later piled it together. They rested dry grass between the bricks to light a fire, and baked them hard and red. I look up at the high vertical lines edged in the rocks that are so much more permanent than me.

I sit up after awhile, take out some tobacco and roll it onto a Top cigarette paper, because it burns longer that way. I smoke half of it, and grind the butt on my white sneakers. I am day dreaming a while before Hugh shows up. I’m thinking about when I was a kid. The heat feels good, and there is no wind. I see a flock of white birds. Some of the birds are talking to me like concerned grown-ups. They are really just
chiding each other perhaps. Still, I try to hear what they are saying, but I don’t speak bird.

At the same time I am thinking of my first boyfriend, Trippy. We used to go up on the bluff, above his mother’s house on Morning Star Drive near Zuma Beach, and tie sheets to our wrists and ankles. We would run with the sheets pulled tight against our bodies, walk up against the wind near the edge of the cliff and then jump off. We would throw our arms and legs into the air and scream. The wind would lift us off the ground and blow us back several feet toward the house.

Then Trippy and I would go eat dinner. He’d eat a big steak while I ate my veggie burgers and fruit. His mom fretted over my protein intake, my thinness, and my shabby wardrobe. I didn’t care. I tried the clothes she wore, but they were too short and all the clothes she thought I should wear when we went shopping made me look like a middle-aged matron. She took me to Merle Norman cosmetics, and they slathered me up like a clown. It made the sharp masculine angles in my face stick out. I looked like my father in drag. I felt like a cross-dressing streetwalker.

She even had a professional dresser come from Beverly Hills to show me clothes. She put me in this ridiculous cowboy hat and a long denim thing. I looked like I belonged in Texas, or like I should be breeding Arabian horses like Bo Derek. She said people were into the look, but I never saw it on the street. We kept the hat for laughs, and Trippy wore it sometimes.

I settled for some khakis and a few white blouses with a tailored fit, some silver and a skirt. I liked the plain, long black skirt and a couple of pieces of chunky silver jewelry that helped her be less embarrassed when we went out to eat. When she
decided I should leave, I left with only the clothes that I entered with on my back. She turned cold like the earth’s core, and Trippy just turned away. Like he was embarrassed of who he was when he’d met me. He couldn’t even break up with me. He had his mom do it.

Trippy used to call me, Birdie, because he said I was so flighty and unsettled. After dinner we retired to our nest. His room was huge with a big skylight. The special rocks and sticks and bird feathers he found were on shelves along the wall. Sometimes we saw the stars through the skylight, and then sometimes he reeled the cover over it, so we could sleep longer, hidden from daylight.

We had so many bruises on our bodies that people thought we were S&M freaks, but it was only from going wind catching. I was fourteen and Trippy was seventeen and he loved me, I think, though we never had sex. He thought I was too young, though, we kissed a bunch. He loved me. I’d like to think that is what the birds were trying to tell me. They were saying that and something else, but then Hugh came up making out of politeness humming noises in his throat and then lay down next to me, so I couldn’t make it out. Hugh put his hand on my stomach. He asked me if I was okay and we lay there awhile.

Sometimes since I’ve been married to Hugh I’ve wanted to tell Hugh to shove off. I’ve not wanted to be there. We are a basketcase couple. Between the two of us he wants to put all our emotions in one basket. I don’t think he is ready for all the things I have felt. I know I’m not. He has plenty of his own stuff to feel.

Hugh says I see you and me getting naked. It’s off-season for tourists, so no one should see us. Anyone who did see us would probably be grateful for the odd change of
scene, he said, two people making out. I say no way. Hugh takes off his shirt anyway, to show me his chest and sway me, but it doesn’t work. He adds his tee-shirt on mine to make a bigger pillow under my head and then rests his head on my leg.

Hugh’s singing “I’m So Bored With the U.S.A.” as he taps the song’s drumbeat on my knee. I feel Hugh’s hand rubbing my leg and I pop up and sit down a little, out of his reach. I am never alone I think, never just alone. I ask Hugh what made the Devil’s Post Pile. I’m ready to wow him with trivia. He says he thinks it was wind, rain, earthquakes and other types of erosion. He says that myths are fun but they are probably piffle. Then he jokes and says that maybe aliens left it here to confuse us.

He starts telling me about Sky’s latest take on Jungian theory, talking about anima and animus. Hugh talks about the dehumanization that happens when we lose touch with the deeper unconscious layers of us. I tell him he’s been spending too much time with Sky. I thought Sky was teaching him to surf, not polluting him with all that psycho-babble. Hugh says his ears get infected when they get wet. I tell him to go eat an onion.

Hugh says I’ve got to get in touch with my shadow. Id, I say. We don’t usually quibble over terms. I start pouting because he’s ruining my peace and quiet. Why can’t he just sit and be instead of talking about being?

Hugh says I’m beautiful. He says it quietly. My defenses go when he says that because I have never felt beautiful, and he knows this. He says that I’m Miss Beautiful Peyote Woman. I tell him no, that I didn’t do that stuff. Hugh frowns at me. I stopped smoking dope, and he stopped eating red meat and all that, but he doesn’t quite believe
me. He said that if I’d taken some peyote he would have too. He’d have wanted to know what I was feeling so he could help me.

I pull the peyote out of my pocket and throw it as far away as I can, throwing some of my anger with my father with it. I feel a little better. Hugh is sitting up and holding one of my ankles to steady me. I’m not going to fall. He says he’s glad I didn’t do it. He just took it out of the glove compartment to make sure where it was.

He doesn’t want me to turn into a burnout like Trippy. He came down to the Twist once for old times sake, and Hugh just didn’t see what I had seen in him. He was tan and wrinkled from being out in the sun all the time. He looked older than he was and had this constant glazed confusion on his face. He brought us a Bible, and signed the inside with a note that said, “Remember He walks with you.” Trippy was preaching on the street to strangers in Santa Monica. This was before Santa Monica was fancy. When the shops were old and the streets were dirty. Before the movie business had moved in, chasing the homeless from their old metal benches and erecting large topiary dinosaurs in their place. Trippy took the bus from Zuma every day. Hugh thought he was way whacked out. At least Trippy was doing something.

Sometimes when Hugh is looking at me, like he is now, so proud and whipped and interested in me, I give in to him out of happiness. We start kissing and I feel warm. The shale chips feel like soft dry pottery powder under me after it cracks. Together we are powerful like Pan Gu.

Kissing, we blend and change, and the birds come down to watch. In my head my brother waves in the distance and walks up to me like when we were kids here
together. His feet make no noise on the slag. He flaps his arms and floats up in the air a few inches from me. I pull away from Hugh’s kisses and open my eyes.

Then Frank’s feet touch the ground. Hugh is busy getting up. He says he will bring the sandwiches we made from the car. He asks if I want anything, and I wave him off. Frank smiles at me. My eyes are open and he is still there.

I ask Hugh if he sees anything strange, and he says just you. Hugh puts his hands on his hips, looking slightly like Mr. Clean. He’s so buff, and Frank is so delicate. I hand Hugh a tee-shirt and he tries to pull it over his head. He says wrong one, and I switch with him. Frank is still there. I blink my eyes. I think I am seeing my dead brother.

I say, “I can see my brother.” He says that’s because you were here together once. He says he sees stuff sometimes. Like he thinks he sees his dad in the supermarket, lots of places. It just happens. He says my memories are surfing, and it will do me some good, or maybe it’s heat stroke. He’ll get me some water from the car.

He’s comforting me because he knows my mother sometimes did think she saw things. Lots of things she saw she took as signs from God, but they didn’t seem to make her happy. He says if I were mad it would have shown up by now. Maybe it was late. I don’t know.

“Hey,” I say when Hugh is out of earshot. I’m going crazy like my mother did.

I say it again, and Frank sits down next to me. He’s not saying anything, so I say hey again. Frank says, “Hay is for horses,” like he used to, and my insides start churning like erratic waves. Frank kisses my forehead, but it doesn’t feel like anything.
I shake my head no. This is totally too weird for me. I get angry and start crying a little.

Frank fades out. When I buck up a bit, he floats back into my mind. Trippy once said God doesn’t give you more than you can handle, but I can’t handle this. I am scared. I want to pull out of my body. I want to float away with Frank. I want to stay where I am. Then he is in front of me. He is juggling with stones and the peyote button. Two rocks and one mushroom. Rocks in the air at once. He catches the peyote button in his mouth. He says it tastes awful but thanks me. Then he shrugs his shoulder and relaxes. He smiles. His loose curly hair makes him look cherubic, but he isn’t. I remember how I’d pull a curl out and watch it spring back, back when our days were lazy.

“Hugh hasn’t had his dream yet,” he says. The men I’ve trusted in my life always have the same dream. Frank comes to them and asks them how many months they have known me. Then he asks them to go help paint a house with him. It’s weird, but it’s happened to Trippy, and Sky had it after I moved out and we got to be better friends. He’s not here for me. If he is here it’s to give Hugh the dream, but Hugh can’t see Frank. Maybe he has been hanging out with spirits of the Yokut Indians that used to live west of the Pile. He used to love looking through National Geographic before we went someplace. He liked facts.

Franks starts to walk away. He is wearing swim trunks that rest on his hips. Somehow I thought he would fade away slowly like a Cheshire cat. Why did he leave for death? “Why’d it happen?” I ask. Frank shrugs his shoulders. “Because it did,” he
says. He smiles at me. I can see his belly button. I forgot he was an inny. How could I forget that about someone I loved?

My eyes fall over the line of his hips. He is still eleven. I always pictured him growing in age, like I did over time. I am older than him, and it feels sort of strange and powerful. Frank moves in the distance. He flaps his arms up and down and hops like a bird. “Chit wee, chit wee, chit wee,” he says, for no good reason.

He gains only a little buoyancy, staying in the air for a few seconds at a time. He is still learning from the birds. He is fading out of my vision. I see him getting smaller. I imagine him drifting over to a place called Red Meadows nearby.

I think of him lounging in the meadow’s sea of lavender, shooting star, lupine, larkspur and yellow Indian Paint Brush. I studied flowers the way Frank studied birds as a kid. It wasn’t just a hobby. It was a passion. He’s floating with mountain blue birds as they flit around, learning how to fly by watching them. He’s trying to flit lightly about the open meadow and eating fruit: elderberries, currants and gooseberries from the bushes among the Lodgepole pines. Why not? What better place could he be?

Lodgepole cones remain closed until the heat of a forest fire opens them to release their seeds. I feel like fire. The seeds of something strange are being sprouted. There is some fire in me. I don’t know what I am supposed to do with it. If I’m going crazy, I’ll be in good company. But it doesn’t feel like that.

Maybe this is what was supposed to happen today, here at the Devil’s Post Pile. Maybe I’m supposed to see Frank here in a beautiful place. While Frank is fading almost out of vision, Hugh is walking to me. The noise of the shale under his feet is solid and comforting.
He says he just had the weirdest daydream about my brother. I said I knew. He laughed and handed me a plastic thermos cup full of water. He said maybe you need this too, and I said yeah. He balanced from side to side on the slag like he was surfing and said, “Hang five.” I smiled. “You’re so seventies sometimes,” I said.

Hugh tells me I’m celestial. I put him into orbit. I want to laugh. I am suddenly tired of being a hippie. I think of lipstick and no white pumps after Labor Day. Then I think of the days when Trippy and I went out wind catching. When I was angry, and I wanted to wear my torn jeans in Ritz-Carlton and drink tea. How maybe I’d been wind catching for different reasons than him.

I think of Frank, and it feels okay to love him. Something in me deepens and swells. Hugh is my husband, I think. It finally really hits me. He wants me. I thought that sometimes people just decide to die. I don’t want Hugh and me to die, though, at least, not for a long time anyway.

Hugh says, “Gravy man,” and flashes me a peace sign. He says that instead of groovy to tease me. I told him that was what I thought everyone was saying in America when I went there, after we bounced across Asia for a while. I thought it was gravy. I was out of the loop. I’d go up to the other girls who were playing jump rope and take my turn, skipping the rope in circles. They’d say, “Your turn.” I’d say, “That’s gravy,” because that’s what I thought they were saying, and then they would all laugh.

That’s why I don’t tell him things sometimes. He teases unmercifully when he gets a hold of something good. It’s lovingly done, but it still hurts. I say gravy back and flash him a peace sign. He sits down and I tell him the seventies are going to come back into fashion. He smiles at me and moves my long hair away from my eyes.
They gave my mother the wrong pills or something, and she was walking around Phil's house like she had somewhere to go. It was early morning, but none of us had any plans. Phil went to work. Phil's wife left for Georgia to see her mother. We were waiting for our father to make his next move. We were watching my mother trying to slow down. Phil said we should stay for a while. There was a new kid on the way to us. Phil didn't say it to my father, but he wanted my father to try to find a way to root himself here in California.

Phil said my father had been floating around and he was going to be in his thirties in a couple of years. Sebastian just couldn't keep running around places with three kids and an exhausted wife, his wife had said. She asked him about the studio, and Phil said it was too big a risk. I didn't know what that meant at the time, but looking back, he was saying my father was a flake. Back then, I only had the inkling that we weren't like other people in other houses. Phil's house was the biggest I'd ever been in.

I heard all this when I got up for a glass of water. Phil had come in from the club with my father, who promptly went to his room and fell asleep in his clothes. In the hall Phil was talking to his wife in a loud drunken whisper, and she was answering in hushed tones. She said she felt sorry for us. It made me feel kind of strange. I didn't think we were pitiful or anything. We were just the way we had always been. It was different listening to grown-ups talk like this.
Phil had taken percentage points instead of cash on a set of light jazz recordings for an album that was titled “Mellow Moods for the Moment,” he had suggested it to the label he worked for. He was a studio trumpet player. He had a steady paycheck. But he wanted to do something fun. Some new interpretations of Christmas tunes were next. He wanted to be creative. Be groovy. But he wanted to reach a wide audience.

For some reason housewives across America thought “Mellow Moods” was a good idea too. It had gotten mentioned in all the womens’ magazines. Back then advertisements had blurbs like “Capture Your King with this Enchanting Perfume,” or, “In Celebration of Your Husband’s New Raise Be Jeweled in Elegance.” “Sounds to Sooth his Soul,” was his next title. The cover would have a picture of two rich people cozying up on a fat leather couch, drinking whiskey on the rocks.

That was what he said when we ate the cumin-scented gumbo his wife fixed at dinner. He said that Cloey probably never thought she’d live like this, being married to a street musician. He came from a rough area in New Orleans, and now he was the only black man on the block. He waved his glass in the air and gestured to the living room, saying, “Can you believe this shit?” My mother smiled. My father was boisterous and said, “Here’s to McJazz!” as he clicked Phil’s raised glass. I helped Cloey sop up the wine he spilt on the white carpet. I’d never seen carpet that color.

Phil wasn’t anyone you would recognize as famous, but he was doing well for himself. My father wasn’t doing as well. And he wanted to be famous. We got here and he spent the ready money he had made from Thailand at jazz bars. He always liked to come into town the big spender. If he didn’t splash the money around a bit, he would
get sullen. But he always splashed too much. With Phil so rich, my father’s splash didn’t make a sound.

My mother had been fun earlier. We went swimming in their pool. Cloey made me put a plastic bubble with a strap that clasped around the waist on, so that half of me floated above water. Frank and I tested them out and splashed. My mother swam a few laps, drank some iced-tea she left on the side of the pool, sat me on her lap, though I was too big for that, and we sang the bumblebee song together.

Cloey sang too as she bounced David on her knee. He was almost two, and the perfect age for the song. It was a bouncy song. So we bounced. Their voices were pretty singing, “Bumblebee bumble by, Buzz around in the blue, blue sky.” When it got to the point where the bee sat down, we all pretended to get stung and laughed. David said, “Ouch.”

Now she was speeding up instead of slowing down. My father was breaking down his drums. His cymbals were all over the floor in front of him, like sandbags in front of a foxhole. His shirt was unbuttoned, and he was sporting an uncomfortable sunburn. He had played some bars in Bangkok. He had come in too late at night. He had made some money. They had tried to work things out. He had spent some money. She was tired of working it out.

It seemed like things were working, but then things started to break down when they got to Phil’s. My mother saw what she didn’t have. It wasn’t Phil who was supposed to have made it. People told her that her husband really had “It.” He could really make it. So where was it? She was tired. She was pregnant. She was ready to
have things. My father told her he’d get it. Lately, though, the only it we had was shouting.

My father walked around the house saying the F-word under his breath. He was usually careful not to cuss in front of us. My mother didn’t like it. But he didn’t care anymore. He walked around, looking swollen from nights he spent drinking hard with Phil and sitting around heavy and sad. When I look back on it, I don’t think I was ever around Phil when Phil had been sober. Even in the daytime Phil had a glass in his hand.

“Get your mother some ice water, Claire,” my father said.

I was burned and tired too. I looked at Frank, and he put down a book on birds he was looking at. He wanted to be an ornithologist. I didn’t know I needed to be anything yet. He got up from the other overstuffed green chair. His legs made a sound like air escaping, and the chair let him go.

His face had the same expression as before he stood up. Little got to him. He was the Harold Lloyd of the family, moving carefully and slightly exaggeratedly, like a silent movie actor. His watery eyes and pouted lips expressed nothing. He was worn down from looking after mother and me.

He packed and unpacked suitcases. He knew the time zones in different places. I said thanks. He looked at me with mild annoyance and went off to the kitchen. I knew I was taking advantage. I knew I should do it myself. He took awhile, but when he got back he had a pitcher of lemon water with real lemon slices in it and four glasses. He was like that.

When the month was over, my father would be working for the Air Force again. He had a contract working on helicopters that had been used in Vietnam. He could
make parts that didn’t exist yet. People told him what they wanted, and he sat and thought. He made things work. He got paid, but there never seemed to be any money.

Phil had the nice house in the canyon that Joni Mitchell sang about. Cloey was relaxed. Cloey was the “Lady of the Canyon.”

There was always a pot of gumbo on the stove, and an open door, when they lived in New Orleans. My mother and her were jazz friends. Cloey used to try to get me to eat oysters for breakfast at two a.m., if nothing else was left after the set. Phil and my father played together. Cloey and my mother watched. I watched. Frank watched. I thought it was what women and kids did. Watch the men do things. Frank would grow up to do things. I would grow up to watch.

Now we were watching my mother do things. We were watching her buff her shoes with her handkerchief. She was looking out the window. The lemon water didn’t change anything. She took a glass and spilled a little. Frank wiped it up with a napkin. Things like the carpet mattered now. The wine stain made my mother nervous. A man in a car got out and came in the next day, after the spilling, with a white uniform on. He used a solution and made it disappear. My mother had looked at it really carefully before she paid him with what was left in her wallet.

I noticed other things. I was noticing that my father didn’t look like everyone else’s fathers. Other fathers wore black pants and ties with long white shirts and crimped collars. They owned things. They didn’t rush off, leaving their clothes behind. They got up in the morning and got home at five. That was what the TV shows my mother liked were telling us. That was what my mother wanted. I just wanted it to be quiet. My father wanted to be a real drummer. My brother wanted to watch birds.
My father put on his shirt, with its big fat stripes in several natural looking greens. It was out of fashion or maybe never in fashion. He didn’t look like other people’s fathers. On the Air Force base he wore open Hawaiian shirts. He sat in his room and calculated solutions. He played his drums. He thought. He couldn’t think here. He started to seem silly to me in his wing-tipped shoes and shiny olive pants, and I thought he knew I was feeling that. He looked like he would look better in black and white.

My mother wore a sleek black dress from Cloey’s closet, held tight with a wide belt at the waist. She looked like a bell swaying when she walked. Her pumps made little impressions on the carpet for a moment after she stepped on it. She picked up a handbag. She looked at her watch. She was pale. She would never ruin her skin by falling asleep in the sun.

We hoped it was working. We had been perfect kids for days and days. Phil had bent to Cloey’s wishes a few days after the wine on the rug. Cloey never went to visit her mother. That was new too. She was in Savannah. She wasn’t making sure we ate. She had left her son for us to watch. He was in training pants. David wailed, but she went. It wasn’t like her. But nothing was like anyone lately. We were all different.

Phil took my father into the studio to audition. We all came to watch. We sat in chairs that lifted us in the air so our feet didn’t touch. I spun my ankles around in circles to entertain myself. Frank tried to see what was labeled. He wanted to figure out what every button and knob on the console might do. Around in circles went my feet, while the sound guy tested the sound. Then we were all quiet.
Phil was working on, “Sounds to Soothe his Soul.” All his titles had to have words with the same letter to describe them. It was a marketing scheme, so people would know the brand of sound. They were looking to catch a religious audience next. There would be a Christmas album if this one did well. And that would be even bigger since everybody liked Christmas.

He couldn’t just let my father slip into the band and pick up a check like he wanted. The producers were really tight. They were older men. They were like those people who lived through the Depression and the War. They wanted life really ordered. Even though the nineteen fifties had been so over, they wanted to keep the feeling.

People’s roles where defined. Procedures had to be followed. Martinis at five. Auditions at eight a.m. Recording at one p.m. All in your places. We had watched Phil handle it before, as guest viewers. Phil brought in a bottle and went to the bathroom to sip it. “Everything’s cool,” he had said. He smelled like breath mints when he worked. The producers checked their watches. My father hit his drums.

The space between the beats seemed endless. He was playing in slow motion and his face looked disconnected. He was hitting softer. It was passionless and passionate. He was playing without feeling. He was passionately sad. My mother looked through the glass in the control booth and shook her head and then looked at us. Her hair was wrapped in a Hermes silk scarf. Phil bought it for her somewhere on Rodeo Drive.

Then my father started hitting harder like he usually did. He was wearing a white shirt with a black tie. He was sweating a little. Half moons of water showed a little under his arms. He was smiling. He was hitting hard. Phil wanted to be a Miles
Davis, but he wasn’t willing to take the risk yet. He would make the record label money until he could have his own company and make his own sound. My mother had said to my father to be himself. “Be yourself, baby,” she said, but she probably didn’t mean it.

My father played. He really played. He played drums the way Eddie Heywood played piano. Like a Clydesdale with its hooves stuck to fly paper. My mother started moving her hips a little to the rhythm. Phil got excited. His face glowed. The producers looked at their watches. His five minutes were up.

Phil made a cut gesture with his fingers near his neck and my father stopped. We waited around in the lobby. It had gold records on the walls. Phil walked my father out with his hand on his shoulder. It wasn’t the sound the producers were looking for, and that was that. He’d had his shot and he’d blown it. Phil walked us outside. He said Sebastian ought to take it as a badge of honor. He could be proud of not being hired by their pencil pushers. They produced Lawrence Welk for God’s sake, he had said. Maybe my father just didn’t have the right clothes. He wore his shiny pants.

My father wanted to go back in for his kit, but Phil said someone would pack it and send it to the house. We went to the house. My father did laps in the pool and then drank good scotch. Frank buried himself in bird books. I weeded a patch of garden. The Hispanic maid gave Cloey’s son a bath. My mother stayed behind to look in the shops. Cloey had given up an exclusive appointment for a spa day to go to Savannah. It was paid for, so my mother went to get pampered. Phil would drive her home.

My father was usually fairly polite in other people’s houses. After the studio the F-word got louder. He walked around saying it a lot, as if he were punctuating
important statements he hadn’t gotten around to making in his head. “Phil’s a standards
man,” he’d say under his breath. He usually only drank at night but now he was
drinking Phil’s liquor in the day too. My mother paced. We were waiting around for
the aircraft contract to take effect, to send my father to Vietnam, and Phil and my
mother were taking long lunches.

A taxi pulled up for my mother. My father looked up from his drum kit. He
was fixing it. Packing it right, the way those pencil necked bastards hadn’t done. My
mother was angry. She thought my father was helping another war to start going. One
he knew about, but we didn’t. She wanted to stop thinking about the world.

She’d taken off her silver-colored wristband. The government had issued them
with the names of missing in action American soldiers, ones who hadn’t come back
from Vietnam. It took her a while to let hope go. Frank and I took off ours much
sooner. They were missing and you were supposed to not take them off until they came
back.

We knew they were dead because of the numbers they would say on the
television. There were so many numbers. The numbers of the dead didn’t change her
faith though.

The bracelets didn’t close all the way, and they were stiff. If I twisted mine just
right, it would indent on my wrist and make a little c-shape. I was fascinated by the
little mark it left. I pretended I was a soldier in the war. This mark was a piece of
shrapnel, or a scar from a bayonet. I wanted to be a soldier. I told Frank. Frank said
there were no women soldiers. I took the bracelet off.
My father jumped up with a confused look on his face. Then he looked really mad, as she picked up her purse and straightened her blouse at the waist. She thought he was keeping the wars coming. Bell Huey helicopters were fat bumblebees of machinery she said. But there were other things too. “You’re staying,” he said firmly. My father gave her an expectant look. My mother turned her head. She glanced at him and us.

She glanced at Cloey’s little David tapping his hands on one of the cymbals on the floor and smiled sadly. She looked at my father again. “What are you looking at you rhythmless fuck?” she said as she walked out.

His mouth opened and closed like a fish wanting air. He got up fast. But she was out the door and in the taxi before he could hit the archway. He stood there in the archway, making himself look bigger for nobody. Then he walked out into the street and kept going, slowly, in the direction the cab had gone.

My brother asked me if I was ok. He sat on the floor and David toddled over and put his arms up for Frank. Frank bounced him up and down on his lap a little. It was the maid’s day off. I told Frank I just wanted to be out in the sun. He said we were already too red. I had more olive in my skin like my mother. I tanned. Frank burned. I figured I couldn’t get much worse. I got up and reached for David. I put his juice bottle to his lips and he sucked on it. I brought him to his crib for his toddler nap.

I lay out there on a long raft and listened to the scratchy Bacharach album Phil had left on the record player for my mother. It was a little warped, and it skipped over some of the words to Raindrops Keep Fallin’ On My Head, though I knew most of it. I just added the words in my head. The day before when it had been playing, my father
sharply said that maybe Phil could work with Burt Bacharach after this, on an album called “Bubblegum for my Baby,” and my mother and Phil took it off the turntable. There were a bunch of little scenes besides the one with the wine.

I didn’t know how to add up all the scenes I had in my head. I remembered when we went to the hospital to see Cloey’s new son. She thought she couldn’t have children. It was almost two years before, so Frank was nine and I was seven. We were all at the hospital for this child. Phil had been there earlier. He saw the baby with my father’s high cheekbones: His face was my father in miniature only the color of light caramel. There wasn’t any mistaking it. He was my dad’s.

Cloey was crying. Phil had looked insane and he’d just walked out of the hospital, she had said. She didn’t meet any of our eyes. David had flyaway, curly hair. The way it happens when there is a blonde in the mix. Cloey was light skinned. My father said no one needed to know. He asked the baby’s name. She said, “David.” He told her that David looked enough like her. He said, “I’ll find Phil.” My mother put her arms around Cloey and tickled the baby. She’d get mad later. She had wonderful reserve. Cloey looked up so grateful. My mother always knew the right thing to do.

I didn’t put it together when I was younger. I didn’t put it together when I was on the float in Phil’s backyard. I thought how Cloey has fussed over me as a child until David came. She didn’t sing to me much after that. I thought I was tired of airplanes and jet lag. I thought that if my mother kept getting mad then maybe my father would get us a house too.

Frank came out. I was thinking about how Phil and my mother played in the water while my father played his drums in the house. We all left him alone to practice.
I thought how Phil would go turn over *I Still Like to Play French Songs Best*, on the turntable and my mother would float on the surface of the water humming *LA Vie en Rose* to George Feyer’s piano playing.

They laughed and talked in this lazy way that my parents didn’t with each other. Phil would dive in the pool and then jump out to dry in the sun. When my mother wanted to get out of the pool, Phil would always dive in again. He would put his arm around her waist, and help her up the steps and out of the pool.

I fell asleep on the raft, and Frank came out to the water and jumped on the raft too. Water splashed my legs, and I woke up. He said it was time to go inside before I looked brighter than a lobster. I thought of the steamed asparagus with hollandaise sauce my mother made to go with the fat steaks Phil had grilled the night before. They both liked fancy cooking.

We got out and dried off, and I went to finish my nap in my guestroom. Frank sat down next to me. I woke up, and Frank kissed my neck. I looked at him. He told me he saw Phil kiss my mother like that. I looked at him and he leaned in to kiss my face. He’d kissed me before, but this way was new and weird, and then I heard my father in the doorway.

He was weaving in the doorway, and he grabbed me by my arm. He was pulling me on the carpet and I was getting carpet burn. Then he picked me up and took me into the back yard. He threw me in the pool. He was cursing at me. I was tired of bad words and the slammed doors and strange looks. My legs were stinging and my arm hurt. I started crying, which I usually tried not to do. He didn’t like it.
When I look back on it now, I still tell myself if I hadn’t cried the rest wouldn’t have happened. I know it isn’t true maybe. I just wish sometimes that I could go back and change that moment. I feel like I made such a big mistake to cry. It was just something that happened in my life. I say that to myself. It was just something that happened to me in my life.

Frank didn’t like tears either, and he yelled at my father. He yelled at him to stop it. He said, “Stop it, could you just please stop it,” and my father turned his attention to Frank. He told Frank to dive. Frank dived in the water as I got out. I got away from the yelling, but I couldn’t let Frank stay out there all by himself. My father made him swim. He made Frank swim longer, lap after lap. He told Frank he was going to swim it off. When Frank tried to put his fingers on the side of the pool for a minute, my father yelled some more. Frank swam. Frank didn’t want to swim.

It was my fault. I knew he was tired. I should have got my father to stop. But he was a night-and-day father. I was frightened of the night one. We had the day father and the night drinking father. The easy-going Air Force guy in the day, and the sometimes easygoing but often bitter and frustrated musician at night. Sometimes the bitter one came out in the day. He was out this day.

I knew Frank was tired. Frank stopped swimming laps and he looked at me. My father started yelling. Frank’s expression changed. He looked at me, with this look I had never seen before, like he was saying goodbye, but I didn’t get it. His body shook and then there was water over his head, and my father was jumping in.

My father was dragging him out. He was standing over him on the grass shaking him. Hitting him hard on the back so that I thought he was still mad. Putting
his mouth on Frank's like Frank had tried to do with me, and then blowing hard. He shook Frank again, but Frank wasn't doing anything. Then my father let out this horrible noise like nothing I've ever heard before or since. It was this terrible terrible... I don't know what.

He told me to get the phone and dial zero, but I couldn't move. I couldn't leave Frank. My father carried Frank into the bedroom. I dialed. A bunch of people in white uniforms came then. They weren't calm like the carpet guy. They ran with Frank lying down on a hammock with sticks on both sides, fast and excited out of the house. My father went with them. Fast and excited. It was like he got sober instantly.

All I knew was, I let my father and Frank down. I shouldn't have cried. It was always better not to cry. Crying just made the shouting last longer. Crying made my mother go into the hospital. Crying was bad. I tried to cry now when it wouldn't bother anybody. I felt like it, but I couldn't. After all this, that went on for a long time. I couldn't cry.

Then Phil and my mother were in my room. They asked me where my father and Frank were. I told them about the kissing and the hammock and the people in white coats. My mother grabbed me to her really tight, and Phil ran out of the door to the hospital.

My mother sat down on my bed with me and just held really still with her eyes shut tight. My father came home in the nighttime. I was in her arms when he woke us up. He said, "Baby." His eyes were wet. My mother opened her eyes as he touched her cheek. He sat down. He was really quiet. He said, "Claire go get your mother some ice water."
My mother was overdressed for a bullfight. So were we. She had on this A-line, chocolate-brown dress that matched her hair, and one inch heels in the same color. My father had given it to her that morning at the nervous hospital before she checked out. We had been to fetch her. She wanted to be with us.

I was going to see my first bullfight in Pamplona with my mother. I knew it was a strange thing for a girl to want to see, because my mother said so. I wanted to see the red cape twirl in the air. I wanted to see the bull scratch his foot on the ground.

On the way to the arena my father took off his white suit jacket. He laid it carefully across the backseat of the taxicab. He put his arm around my mother. He played with one of her gold earrings, tracing the outline of the hoop. I pulled on my gray sweater. I wanted to take it off. My father just turned his head from side to side, in an exaggerated “No” at me. I stopped fussing but it made me mad. I just looked down at my brother’s white buck shoes.

My mother was petite. She looked fragile. Her hair was different, as if she had chopped it off in a fit of anger, and one of the nurses had tried to make it look right again. Still, she was beautiful. My father rolled the window of the back seat down for us. My brother hung his head down a little, and then leaned it out of the window.

He was the only one sensibly dressed. Frank looked up in the sky, and at what the birds were doing. He wore a thin linen shirt and some cotton pants. My mother didn’t care if he wore a dress jacket. He was too small to be noticed yet. I was younger, but I was a girl. Girls got judged more. I was supposed to look nice and put
my hands in my lap as if I was getting ready to pray. I sat with my hands in my lap, wishing I could hang my head out the window.

My father told me about a time before we were born, when my parents had seen a toreador gored and then flung into the air. He fell back onto the edge of the ring. “Good for the bull,” my mother had said. He remembered that. That she had rooted for the bull.

My mother described the bull as if it were a person to us. It was big, brown, fierce and sincere. My father told us he liked that bull because it didn’t take anything from anybody. My father said he wanted Frank to be like that. My mother believed if the toreador had hit the bull it wouldn’t have budged an inch. The bull was big. She liked that. And she touched my father’s chest with the palm of her hand across the front seat, where he had turned to talk to the three of us.

I was the one who would be stout and big like my father, bending to light one of my mother’s cigarettes. My face was good, but I would be a fleshy girl. She put her hand on my head and her Girard Perregaux watch stuck in my hair. My father tried to help and it just got worse. My mother left the watch on my head and Frank pulled the hair, separating it into little strands. My mother had nervous hands.

Frank’s real name was Frances. For the saint. But my dad said it was a sissy name. Only my mother could call him that without being corrected by him. I pressed my fingertips on Frank’s wrist, and his hand closed over the top of mine. It was noisy and hot getting out of the cab.

My father argued with the driver that he had parked too far away from the street where people ran with the bull. The driver told him the stadium would be very
congested if we waited and ran with the bull. My father wouldn't pay unless we were closer. He wove through a side street and put us within half a block of the beginning of the run. My father gave him a tip that was big enough to make him stop resenting this inconvenience.

We weren't rich but we looked it. My parents were young enough to see that the future was a ways away, and they had time to prove themselves to the world. My mother stayed with our grandmother. My father stayed in his barracks. There was money for frivolous things.

People were all over, laughing and talking and bumping into each other. Two horsemen, in all their bright colors and feathers, suddenly burst into the middle of the ring at a gallop. They turned in opposite directions and galloped round the arena on each side. When their paths crossed, my parents and Frank gave a loud Ooh! but the horses didn't run into each other.

I worried about the bullfighter as we sat down in our seats. I thought that if he could fly into the sky at the whim of the bull, we might not see him. His gold ornate costume was the color of the sun. He could fly toward the sun and then crash down on my mother and crush her. Her heart could explode like a star going nova.

My mother kept waving her small fist in the air. The three of them were shouting. Even Frank. My father pounded his fists on the side of the wood bench, vibrating my legs. This wasn't the glamorous matador twirling in his magical red cape. The toreador took advantage, waving the red and yellow cloth and then running away. The clowns ran in and pushed sharp sticks in the bull's back, and then they ran away.
It wasn’t a fair fight. It wasn’t a dance. It was just some men who were ganging up on an animal. I looked at Frank’s shoes for comfort. I closed my eyes and decided to think of a different day. I thought of the day that I decided I wanted to see a bullfight. It was the week of Las Fallas and we had gone to Valencia. There toilets are unnecessary, from the look of the streets, and the children are violent. Looking back on it, I think now that no one there understood the danger of life.

People spent all year long building these cardboard statues up to thirty feet in the air, and then they burnt them for everyone to see. We saw a sculpture of four muscular horses. I was sure it would fall into pieces, and that one of the tails would fall, burning horribly into the crazy crowd.

One of the children ran up to Frank and put a firecracker in his hand. They lit it, and it exploded just above his head as he threw it. Wild-eyed older people were pouring gasoline on everything in sight. The crowd was impatient for fire then, like the stadium people wanted to see the bulls’ blood now.

I was on my father’s shoulders. I could see everything. Someone lit a hanging line of sparkling poppers that strung across the plaza and ended on a gasoline-soaked paper. It burned quickly and spread and sparks fell on the crowd. We were pushed back by the earnest spray of the firemen’s hose, the way people were pressing against me now, in the bullfight stadium.

Occasionally the fire would ignite a pinwheel and sparks of white would start anew. A pinwheel flew loose and spun off horizontally, and bounded on like a mad short-hop ball. I thought of all the flames because they were pretty. Not like this. Then
suddenly I was with them again when Frank threw an arm around me. I turned my face into his chest, but I never opened my eyes.

My father was angry with me when he saw me hiding. He told me to look. The torreador moved his cape and watched the way the bull changed angles and turned his horns. The scene was making me dizzy. I was seasick from the moving bodies around me. I closed my eyes. My father pulled at my shoulder. He wanted me to look at it. He said it was beautiful. My insides got sick. His arm was heavy on my shoulder, and the bull was already wounded.

We ran with the bull earlier. I lost my bolo hat. My mother bought it for me at a booth, in the open market near Corte Ingles. It was in a window of a shop that was off a small pedestrian street near a café. She let me run loose with Frank to look at things. She watched me to see what excited me. She always figured out our hearts. I loved that hat. It made me feel strong like my father.

My mother drank her glass of wine and she took her pills with it. Before the pills my mother got really bad sometimes. My father cried in front of us. After I turned five though, he didn’t want us to cry anymore. Frank never cried. Sometimes he used to when my mother cursed my father from her hospital bed. There was a war and my father was building helicopters for it. People were dying. He was killing children. It frightened me and Frank.

My father finished his fairly expensive table wine by himself as my mother watched us shop. When we wandered back, she had Frank sit in her place, on one of the white ice cream table chairs next to my father. My father looked funny in the curly-q wrought-iron chair.
My father's legs sprawled out underneath the table. His feet were below ours under the chair. Frank's hung down not touching anything; the tips of my toes touched the ground. They rested there. Then my father got up and covered our eyes with his big hands. My mother put my hat on my head. She handed Frank the pocketknife he wanted.

I lost the black hat she gave me, while we ran into the arena. My father made sure the bull and most of the people had gone ahead before he let us run. While we ran, the bead holding the ties underneath slipped out. It flew up and out behind me. The hat had little tassels all around it like the ones male dancers sometimes wore. I begged for it. I wanted it.

My father said that it was a hat for a boy. My mother said let her have what she wants. She tied that hat under my chin. She told me it fit perfectly. She said that God meant me to have that hat. She kissed my cheeks. Then she let me and Frank kiss her on her right cheek. We kissed her one at a time, as a sign of respect. My father gave my mother a slap on the thigh. He held her, folding his arms around her crossed ones.

Men at other tables looked at my mother. She had good looks, glamour girl style. If she were taller, she could have just stepped out of the cover of a fashion magazine except for the hair. She didn't really even need makeup because of her dark eyelashes. My father looked at the other men with pride. He touched my mother's thigh. It was something for him to have such a wife.

When I got older, I wondered about the music in Spain. It meant something to me. It seemed to be saying something about my mother. As we ran with the bull, I
could hear rhythms. They excited me like my father’s loud jazz drumming did. Bits of music floated from shops. The songs came to me as something so quick and so visceral.

Everything was going fast. I wanted to go after my birthday hat. My mother just pushed me forward slightly. You could get trampled underfoot by people if you looked back. She pinched my arm to make me run faster. It made me mad later when I saw the bruise. Frank cleared the way in front of me, his hand stretched out in front of him like a prow.

I felt people’s footsteps vibrating against the ground. The rhythm and vibration went into my legs. We didn’t watch the bull go by. He was ahead of us. But I still think I could hear his four hoofs hit the ground, two at a time. Hitting, silence, and then Hitting. I heard all the crowd noise and then some quick and insistent music with horns that frightened me.

I ran as fast as I could, but my father picked me up in his arms, and ran with me sitting on his shoulders so I could see it all. He told Frank to sprint, and I stopped seeing him for a moment. His head was lost in a crowd of grown peoples’ chests. When we were almost there, my mother got swept up in the crowd ahead of us. A man had lifted her off the ground. He was not as big as my father was, but she still looked small next to him. Her arms hung loosely around his broad shoulders. She moved her feet in a pretend running motion, losing a shoe. She was laughing.

A muscular man who was running along side of her in the street swept up her shoe, running faster to hand it to her. He handed it to her and she laughed again. It sounded like rain. They disappeared into the arena, and my father carried me in his arms, pressed tight to his chest. I could smell his smell, a nice smell of a man and basil.
He rubbed the fresh leaves of basil under his arms because my mother liked it. It was mixed on his shirt with the smell of the talc my mother wore.

My father stomped his feet as the bull passed the fighter’s twirling red cape. He made several passes at the bull. Somehow the toreador had flung the bull into the air. The animal’s body rested in my father’s lap as if it were weightless. I saw my mother, impaled through her side, on one of the bull’s horns. She sighed. I watched a perfect drop of blood fall from her lips onto her breast. She brushed Frank’s cheek with one hand. She said, “Wasn’t it funny,” as she curled her hand. She moved her fist in a circle, meaning ironic. Then she died.

I opened my eyes again and looked into the ring. The toreador had taken out his sword. He waited, ready for his kill. My father breathed hard; he leaned in toward the ring. Someone pushed from behind, squashing my stomach toward my knees. Then I lost time. I just faded out of myself, like I do sometimes when things get too upsetting.

I was in my father’s arms. I had fainted from the heat of the crowd. He felt me wiggling. He asked me if I could walk. I was on the ground again. Everything was over. Suddenly we were walking down the street. We must have walked a long way. I didn’t see the arena anymore. I noticed my father smelled a little sour like dried sweat when he put me down. Frank put out his hand and I held it.

All the cabs were nowhere to be seen. How could we have walked so far without my noticing? My father’s face squinched up as he asked my mother who those men were. The one who grabbed her up in the arena. The one carrying the shoe. His face was red. He was really angry. My mother said they were strangers.
I remember how she was brave, and stood up to his anger. I could tell he was going to hit her. He had before. I remember it when I struggle. I am so much older, looking back. Still, I know my father blew bad smoke out of a Robusto he lighted, and that he was smelling like old grapes.

Frank stood between them. My mother smoothed her dress with her hands, touching herself from her waist to her hips. She smiled. Frank asked if we could go home. Frank slipped his hand across my shoulder. He wished me a Happy Birthday. My father looked at my mother. My mother looked at my father.

She bent down and looked in my eyes. She told me for as long as I lived, to remember that once I had a black hat with black tassels that the wind took away. She told me to remember that the wind was so jealous of how I looked in that hat, that it had to sweep it away for itself. She told me the hat was mine forever because I would always know where it was. She told me she was mine too. My father looked at my mother. My mother looked at my father. My father raised his arm. My mother squeezed my hand and smiled at me as my father hailed the white taxi.
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